AN ACTOR'S STORY

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS IN THE COSTUME OF THE DICKENS PERIOD.

[*Frontispiece.*

AN ACTOR'S STORY

BY

BRANSBY WILLIAMS

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS

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To

MY WIFE

PREFACE

In submitting this book to the public, conscious of all its shortcomings, I can only hope for the same good-natured indulgence in my new *rôle* off the stage as is invariably given me in my well-tried *rôles* on it.

The book owes its existence to my many friends who have pressed me into this new "part." Having accepted it, not a little unwillingly—for I know my limitations perhaps better than they—I can but trust that the public will be lenient in its judgment of my performance.

I am bound to confess, however, that I am seized with no little amount of "stage fright" now that I make my first appearance in this new character, although I was as willing to try my hand at authorship as the gentleman

who, when he was asked if he could play the violin, said, "I never have, but I don't mind trying"!

My best thanks are offered, for kind permission to use photographs, to Mr. G. Hana, Bedford Street, Strand; Mr. Reinhold Thiele, Chancery Lane; Mr. Lewis R. Protheroe, Bristol; Messrs. Foulsham & Banfield, Ltd., Old Bond Street; Messrs. Campbell-Gray, Ltd., Cheapside; Mr. R. Vining; Mr. A. E. Peacock; to my friend Mr. F. J. Arlton, the nephew of J. L. Toole, for the snapshot of Toole and Irving; and to Messrs. David Allen & Sons for permission to reproduce Mr. Albert Morrow's poster.

Lastly, I wish to express deep gratitude to my good friend Mr. B. W. Matz, the Editor of *The Dickensian*, for the kindly advice and assistance he has given me in seeing the "story" through the press.

BRANSBY WILLIAMS

March 15, 1909

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AN ACTOR'S STORY

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING

I SIMPLY desire to record by way of a start the fact that I was born, with a promise that I shall not bore my readers with minute details of my childhood's days. That they were full of trials and troubles, full of joys and happiness, full of ambitions which never matured, full, in short, of all those things which fill out the small span of any and every child, I have not the slightest doubt. That they are worth glorifying and enlarging upon to-day, I also have no doubt. But the only persons who would consider them at all wonderful or interesting would be my own relatives. This applies, I venture to assert, to many childhood days and reminiscences; and as a reader of some voracity, I must confess to feeling very

much bored myself with those passages in most books commencing, "I was born on a dull and dismal day as the clock struck ten," or whatever other number it was, and the many small family recollections of the days which follow the event. It may be I am mistaken in these views, but being anxious not to bore my readers, and feeling that what I did as a small child must have been very similar to what thousands of other children did during such periods, I propose to leave such things to the imagination of my readers. Besides which I did not keep a diary then, although that would not be necessary for recalling some boyhood pranks and schoolboy tricks if need be.

I remember as a boy reading "David Copperfield," and even then I skipped many chapters in order to meet my hero as a "Man." I have re-read it many times since in its entirety, and each time have been more impressed than ever. When I began to be successful as an actor, I was strangely moved by Dickens's comments on his boyhood, and his wonderful impressions of the places he remembered in after life. Dickens always seemed to retain

in his mind the thoughts of himself as a poor lad in the very humble capacity of sticking labels on blacking bottles, and of his weary walks to and fro between his lodgings in Lant Street, Borough, and his work. When a successful and great man, he felt the same sadness in revisiting some of the scenes and places in the very neighbourhoods of his early struggle, as when he lived amidst them.

So I have felt, and often thought of myself as a little "David Copperfield." I was more fortunate, inasmuch as I was not sent away from home so early. My mother and her parents lost a large amount of money in 1866, when Gurney's Bank, and I think the British Bank, failed. I know that when I was a boy my father and mother were not well off. I was a poor, weak lad, suffering terribly with bronchitis and a very weak chest. I was not a bright boy at school, and was never sharp at figures. I loved history and geography, and above all, the dead languages. The latter seems strange, because I have never found any use for the knowledge, and so have not kept it up. I learned Hebrew, Greek, and

Latin, the former of which I found always most difficult to master, but very interesting none the less. The Rev. Dr. Stern, one of the finest Hebrew scholars of the day, who was one of the imprisoned missionaries in the Abyssinian War under King Theodore, used to examine us at school; and I have often had to sit in the church that used to stand in Palestine Place, Cambridge Heath Road, to listen to him preaching in Hebrew in order that I might write essays on his sermons. He had a very melancholy voice, but was a charming man, and my first "imitation" was of him. I remember the circumstance well. I got into the schoolroom pulpit, and imitated him in the prayer commencing "Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning." Of course it caused great amusement amongst the scholars; but I was caught in the act, and had to write that prayer out a hundred times for punishment, and consequently have never forgotten it.

It was always my mother's wish that I should be a clergyman, but the nearest I got to fulfilling that desire was some time afterwards, when, as a very young man, I joined

the Grattan Guinness Mission in Bow Road, and used to preach, and I think I may say I was not altogether a failure. Many of my sermons were printed and sold at one penny each. One I particularly remember: "Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin, thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting," was my text, and I delivered it with all the dramatic power and fervour at my command. My discourse made a certain kind of sensation at the time. Some years later I went one Sunday to a certain parish church. The preacher for the day was a well-known church dignitary, and when he gave out for his text the "writing on the wall," I pricked up my ears. Still higher did I prick them as the preacher proceeded to read his sermon, for I recognized my own effort of years ago being read word for word and sentence for sentence.

I was often offered the chance of going abroad to commence as a missionary, but my health was too bad. So having no further influence in that direction, and it being necessary that I should make a start in commercial life, I was sent to a firm in Mincing Lane, and started at the very bottom of the ladder

in a tea-tasting business. I do not think, considering my health, I could have gone to a much worse place, although I have some bright memories of the kindness with which I was treated there. The name of the firm was Turner and Clark, and the partners allowed me to leave early every Friday in order to attend the Chest Hospital.

These are the days which remind me of little "David" so much.

I used to walk from Bow Church to Mincing Lane, and whenever I go there now that road sets me thinking of my early days, just as Dickens was set thinking in after years in revisiting scenes of his childhood. The district always had a fascination for me, and even on Saturday evenings I was drawn back to the Mile End Road, like metal to a lodestone. I would listen to the "Debaters" on Mile End Waste, and then spend much time at the stage door of the Pavilion Theatre, looking with awe at the actors going in. I would spy the broughams and buses of the stars going to Lusby's Music Hall (now the Paragon, Mile End Road); and, above all, I was irresistibly drawn to a shop almost opposite the

London Hospital that was for a very long time a "Penny Show" with all the Pepper's Ghost effects. There each week I would stand in the crowd and listen to the old mummer telling all the wonders of the performance which was always "about to commence." This old man was to be useful to me in after years—I little dreamed it then. So much did he become impressed on my memory that I have since reproduced him on the stage. He is the "original" of my character sketch, *The Penny Showman.* This character is called for in every town I visit now, and has been a popular finish to my performance in London and provinces for three years. Some people have said I have exaggerated. Why, I even use my old friend's actual words! One part I reproduce sometimes is identical with what he used to say, and I have never forgotten it. "To-night, bear in mind," were his words, "we play Faust and Marguerite, with the great ghost and spectral illusion as played before all the crowned heads of Europe. Faust and Marguerite for a penny! Bear in mind the one scene alone worth the money! Where the

Devil stabs Valentine in the vitals! A penny! We shall conclude with the whole strength of the Company! All London Actors, bear in mind, in a laughable farcical sketch entitled *Muddlehead in a Fix, or Who's Who and What's What?* A penny! Now's your opportunity," etc., etc.

When I could spare a penny I used to go in and see the show, and I can remember all I saw as if it were but yesterday.

Speaking of remembering, I can go back much further when, as my father says, I was only about five or six years old; he took me to the Standard Theatre, Shoreditch. There was running at the time, to enormous business, Dion Boucicault's *Arrah Na-Pogue.* I remembered all the scenes and the business of that show so well that when I became an actor I easily played "Michael Feeney" from what was in my mind's eye.

So I content myself with giving the assurance that I was born and became in due course a boy, and went to school, and that, further, I started in the world as a "Sample" boy in this tea-tasting line. My work consisted of visiting the various warehouses where the

Photo. by] [*David Hum & Co.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS, AGED 12.

Facing page 8.

different brands of teas were, and bringing the samples back daily to be tasted. This was unsuitable to my health, and after a short spell I had to give it up. I was then sent to the designing room of the Allan Paper Works, Old Ford, Bow. George Allan had known my mother in her palmy days, and took an interest in me. He ultimately gave up the business, and it became what it is now, "Allan Cockshutt & Co.," the centre of the great Wall Paper Combine. I worked there under the new directors, and have received many kindnesses from two or three members of the family. During my stay there, I became an amateur actor, and was sacked weekly in consequence for a long time. At last I left and became a professional, and relied upon myself entirely. I had no help or influence, or even encouragement. I felt acting was to be my vocation, and I did everything in my power to seek an opening. Eventually it came, for I had an opportunity of making a start at the very beginning, since when I have had the usual ups and downs, and many experiences, which now become part of "An Actor's Story."

CHAPTER II

AMATEUR DAYS—NEGRO COMEDIAN AND LIGHTNING SKETCHER

Before I ever appeared in any performance of a dramatic nature, I had a great fancy for the "burnt cork" business, and I used to get special permission from home to go to see the Mohawk Minstrels. How I used to laugh at Walter Howard in his funny banjo songs! James Francis, too (who died so suddenly in a Turkish bath), Ted Snow, Johnny Danvers, and Little Thomas—they were all heroes of mine. I used to black my face at home (and, I'm afraid, my clothes very often) and leave a huge mouth, so that I succeeded in copying Johnny Danvers's annual grin from (y)ear to (y)ear, and sing a song he sang entitled "Clara Nolan's Ball." I was simply a torment and a nuisance at home—at least, my "black" must have been. At last my chance of appearing

somewhat publicly came along. An old school teacher of mine was then assistant-master at a well-known West End Cripples' Home in Kensington; and on the occasion I allude to the cripples were to have a big night to which friends, relations, and subscribers were invited. The entertainment took the form of a Nigger Troupe. Just imagine, each performer was a cripple in some way or the other, excepting yours truly! How they enjoyed it all! They seemed to get as much laughter out of it as they expected to get from their audience, and evolved jokes from their own misfortunes. They were all correctly dressed, the conventional corner man, wig and huge collars, large shirt fronts and glittering studs, all complete. In the opening "sit round" I was the "Bones," and at the opposite corner was a poor chap with both legs off and just two wooden substitutes. But what a comedian! The song he sang was "Hear dem Bells," and when it came to the chorus, he simply danced on the two stumps, and every one screamed with a delight that now, after all these years, strikes a painful note when I think of him and his brother cripples. I sang, stump-speeched, and

clowned myself dead tired and hoarse. But what of that? I had appeared in *PUBLIC!* In fact, I think I may say it was my first appearance; and yet it was not really my first public performance, for I recollect I took part previously in a Punch and Judy Show in a mission hall. The figures were all made by myself, and this must have been my first attempt as an entertainer. It took place whilst I was employed at the wall-paper business. I had been there for about two years. One of the designers was interested in a mission, and was about to give a tea to a lot of poor, ragged children, and had heard of my "larks" and imitations of several of the people in the works; for there I imitated and sketched them all, and led them, I am afraid, a terrible dance.

I must explain that to the rolls of foreign paper that came into the works there was attached at each end a piece of wood about five inches long and three inches square. I got a lot of these and started carving and shaping them with a penknife into all the heads of the characters in a Punch and Judy Show. For Punch's nose I got a special piece of wood and shaped it, and then screwed it

into the larger piece. Then I painted them and made them all up, and clothed them correctly, with different sorts of materials that I obtained. I even made the coffin and the gallows necessary for the show; the only thing I lacked was "Toby." Now the next thing was the "show." Well, as I did not intend to give more than a performance at home, I secured a big heavy trunk from my mother, cut away the top part, and hung curtains over it, etc., and made it into a fine stage. Then my friend, the designer and mission worker, persuaded me to give the ragged children a Punch and Judy Show, and I promised. It was a cold, very cold, night, and rather foggy. I couldn't afford a cab, and to carry the things down into the train never entered my dull head; so I packed the "dolls" in a box and put them in the show stage. Now, just try to imagine the weight of the heavy trunk and box of dolls which I had set out to carry on my back, so heavy that I had about every few yards or so to sit down and rest. It was the most miserable collection on earth, and I carried it for about three miles, and landed at my destination more dead than alive, for it must be

remembered that at that time I was a weak lad and suffered much from bronchitis. Anyway, I arrived there, and soon after my enthusiasm put new life into me and I "showed." And, after all, the shouts of laughter at the show were payment enough. I can remember many of those poor wan faces now, how they lighted up after their tea, and how they laughed at my "props" and paraphernalia, which I had to cart home again. Oh, the horrors of it! I got home somehow, however, and was quite ill afterwards, so bad indeed that I did not return to business for two or three days. That was my first appearance. Of course, in the ordinary way, when "props" are made for a show they are always made as light as possible; mine were as heavy as possible.

On another occasion I was making my first appearance as a nigger with "props." I was a bit handy at lightning sketching of celebrities when it was a craze years ago, and used to do two nigger songs and "patter," and then sketch on a blackboard. I had a board specially made—I've got part of it now; it was very weighty, with legs to fold and screw with heavy screws; then I had

a large carpet-bag. I was engaged (oh, how proud I was, too!) to appear as "Bransby Williams, Negro Comedian, Character Impersonator, and Lightning Cartoonist," at the Central Hall, Bishopsgate, formerly known as the City of London Theatre, in one of the Saturday variety shows. I got there. Oh, how easy to write those three words, and how miserable I feel when I remember *how* I got there, with the cumbersome blackboard under my right arm, nearly touching the ground as I struggled along, and the big bag with the "props" and heavy wooden boots, etc., therein! All my "props" were made by myself, the pair of long boots I wore in my stump speech having been fashioned out of felt tops with long wooden soles strapped on. Well, I got there, as I say; and the enthusiasm exhibited cheered me for the ordeal. I "blacked up," and was all ready, feeling as nervous as a cat, and then went on. I worked hard and had the audience roaring and applauding my political sketches. I filled in as much time as I could for them, and of course they were glad, and saw, I suppose, how anxious I was. When I had

finished and had washed, I was handed the grand salary of two shillings for my labour. I was quite satisfied with the honour, but not the pay. Things are somewhat different now; I don't have any very heavy "props," nor do I carry them myself, and I don't work for honour and glory only. Still, I love to look back on the old times, when I slaved hard for a few shillings as an amateur entertainer, and I know it did me no harm.

After I had gained—what shall we say?—more pluck? I commenced singing comic songs, and doing other business, without the "black face." How strange when I think of it! The "black" seemed to give me courage and hide my blushes! I learned many popular songs of the day—one, I remember, I sang a great deal, was then being sung by J. W. Rowley and Pat Rafferty, entitled "We drew his club money this morning." I began to think seriously that I must be original and have my own songs if I were to succeed; so seeing an advertisement concerning the sale of songs, I sought out the author and composer, and wheedled a couple from him at five shillings each with full singing rights. I can

fancy what his face would be like now if he were asked to supply songs on the same terms. He has since become famous in the music-hall world as T. W. Connor, and has written many of the most popular songs of the "stars." Well, I cannot quite remember how it came about, but I was engaged to appear at one of the Saturday "Pops" at the Central Hall, Bishopsgate, as I have just narrated. It was here, when the City of London Theatre, that J. L. Toole made his first appearance. It is now a "rubber factory." I remember passing by and seeing the bills announcing "Jesse Sparrow's Popular Saturday Concerts at Shoreditch Town Hall," and I was as proud as a peacock, to think that I, too, was to appear as a full-blown *artiste* at a Saturday Pop. In those days, Jesse Sparrow (well known to-day in music halls) had such names for his Saturday Concerts as Harry Rickards, James Fawn, Arthur Roberts, Chirgwin, Harry Randall, Herbert Campbell, and the then famous negro comedian, E. W. Mockney. To come to *cues*, as the mummer says, I appeared at the Central Hall. I sang three songs and was then due to give my

Lightning Sketches. I used to draw celebrities on large sheets of paper on a huge board. Lightning cartoonists were very popular in those days. I gave about thirty minutes' entertainment, and when I had packed up, not only my "props," but my easel and board, I was then handed two shillings, as I have said. I quietly asked if that was "all," and was practically kicked out, "props" as well, for my confounded impertinence—and proceeded on my way home, carrying the large carpet-bag and my huge board and easel, feeling very small and sad. Still, I was just as enthusiastic and eager for the fray next day.

In my young and enthusiastic beginnings, one night stands out very vividly. I had got into the company of a strolling player, whom I had once seen in "Pepper's Ghost" show, playing Bob Cratchit and singing comic songs. A few of us in the neighbourhood where I was then living had started a small amateur company, and my friend came, for a few shillings, to assist us. It occurred to him that a "benefit" for *himself* would not be amiss; so he fixed on what we should nowadays call

the last place on earth for a successful benefit —a concert hall at Enfield. I think he chose it because he must have got the hall for next to nothing. The programme was a full one, and amongst the "turns" on it were "a comic singer," "a negro comedian," "a lightning cartoonist," and "a character actor." I cannot recall the names of these performers, except that of the "lightning cartoonist," who figured on the bills as Mons. Armand. But it does not matter much, since each of these "acts" was done by myself under assumed names. Indeed, nearly the whole of the programme was filled by me, with the exception of the farce which concluded the entertainment. At the end of what I might term a very arduous night's work, I was, as might be imagined, just done up. Realize, then, my feelings—an ardent enthusiast, no money in my pocket, and dead beat—when I found that the manager and all concerned had decamped with everything, and I was left behind to do the best I could for myself. But everything has an end, and many troubles have a sequel.

Years had passed; I had become a "star,"

and was well boomed on a certain occasion all over the city of Glasgow, where the people have always been kind to me. Each night the theatre was packed, and I never worked so well. As I took my last call at the end of one of the evening "shows," I caught sight of a face I seemed to remember. I had to return to the stage, and in a few words thanked the audience for their kindness and their welcome back, but I still saw that face, and on leaving the stage for the last time, I told my dresser to go round to the circle and stand by its owner, and if he was about to leave the theatre, detain him and tell him some one wanted to see him. I changed in a great hurry, and was soon in the front of the house, and there stood behind the seat of the man whose face stood out so prominently to me whilst I was on the stage. There, sleeping through the remainder of the programme, was the old actor of years ago, who had left me stranded. I touched him on the shoulder. He looked up, dazed, and saw me. When he could find words to speak, he said, "By God, and it is the same! My lad, you're a great star, and I——!" "Well," said I,

"what are you doing here?" He then told me that he had an old card on him, and had presented it at the box office, and got in for warmth and a rest, as he was starving. It was my turn to do a good turn for a bad one of years ago, and I did not lose the opportunity.

CHAPTER III

FROM WORKING MEN'S CLUBS THEATRICALS TO THE STAGE

My first appearance as a real actor, as I thought, came about in this way. I saw an advertisement in the *Stage:* "Wanted, Amateur," etc., etc. I applied, and was engaged. I was given the part of "Gingernutt" in a farce called *We all have our little faults.* I soon mastered the words, and then ran about to get a white jacket and a baker's cap to dress the part. I attended all the rehearsals, with both ears and both eyes well open, I can assure you. I was then given the address of a certain "Working Men's Club" where the performance was to take place, and duly arrived there in good time, quite unknown to my parents. On entering the club—and it was the first I had ever seen—I found inside two stalls on which

whelks and mussels were for sale. It seemed so funny to me, to see these things inside a hall. Then I looked round and thoroughly eyed the place. It was a large hall with sawdusted floor, and rows of seats and tables, like the old music halls. There was the chairman's table with all its accessories, and at the back a fairly large stage. I shall never forget it, for I was as nervous as possible, and when I had been made up—I couldn't make myself up then—the time came for the curtain and my entrance. The usual tap-tap of the chairman's hammer, and up went the curtain. I made my entrance to a most terrible hubbub, and shouts of "Order, please," punctuated by the chairman's tap-tap! "Order, ladies and gents, please!" Then came the cry, "Fine whelks!" "Any orders, please," from the waiters!!! How I felt I cannot describe, or what I looked like. But I know that I went through all the various phases of nervousness I have ever heard of. Yet I safely survived to the end, and, I suppose, gave satisfaction. This performance was the commencement of several years' experience

of playing in working men's clubs, and all kinds of Institutes. I started at the bottom, and gradually became, I suppose, a useful member; for I found myself in general demand.

I think I could fill a book with "Club" experiences alone. I have never regretted those days—and they were hard days—because it was a great struggle, and again because it was a means of earning a few shillings a week extra, which I needed very much. I think those were glorious days now, because they gave me the chance of living in the theatre just at the time when "stock" seasons were fading, and the actor's day of training was finishing. To-day, the actor has no practice ground. If he has the luck to get an engagement in the provinces, it is, as a rule, for a tour—during which he will play *one* part. Perhaps he will remain and play the same part for several seasons. Therefore, if a young man, he has no chance whatever of becoming proficient; and, if an older man, he becomes stilted and a stick, whilst the stage to them both, in my opinion, is no longer an art, but a moulding machine always

turning out the same model. I am always thankful for my training—I dare say there are many ladies and gentlemen, well brought up, who would shudder at such a way of learning. There are many I have known who have never made use of the great experience and chances they have had—mostly because in those days of semi-professionalism they had no one to advise them, and so got to think they were already Irvings and Terrys. I never missed a chance of playing anywhere, and I have had some funny experiences, too. Most of the working men's clubs in London had their own hall and stage and scenery, usually all very small and of the most primitive type—though two or three were very ambitious and had most appurtenances of the ordinary theatre. Those days gave me the chance of playing anything and everything, and of becoming quick at study, for I would learn a part and play it the same night. It also taught one to rely on one's self, and to be ready for any emergency: always prepared to "make-believe."

Soon after I started, I was introduced to a lady who was playing Minnie Palmer's

favourite play, *My Sweetheart*. I joined her company and played, as a first part, "Farmer Hazell." Then at various times some one would fall out, and the management cast its eyes on the young and ardent enthusiast, and so I got the chance of playing better parts. Take this one play, *My Sweetheart*, I played first the Farmer, and during my associations with the lady running this little company I played *all* the male parts—Dudley Harcourt, Dr. Harold Bartlett, and Joe Shotwell—and finally surprised myself by playing the lead, Tony Faust, and singing all the numbers, although I well remember all of them were too high for me.

On looking through some old records of those days, I find I must have played some one hundred and fifty to two hundred parts, including every line of business. This gave me versatility, and I was consequently in demand by the various companies who were regularly booked at these clubs. Sometimes I would get engaged for four or five nights a week, and each time play a different part, and sometimes in a farce as well. One night I would be at, say, Westbourne Park—the next,

Whitechapel — another, Walthamstow — and another, Islington, The one awful thing that stands out in my memory in regard to these performances seems to be the ragged time at which they start their shows—perhaps it would be 8.45 or 9 o'clock before they commenced; and then there would be the long waits necessitated by the change of scenery—all done gratuitously, of course, by members of the club. This meant that the show was over late, and necessitated a rush for the last train or bus. There were no electric trains or motor buses then, and no late services. Oh, the long weary walks home in the early hours of the morning, with the heavy bag of costumes and props to carry, and the huge salary of five shillings a performance, which, in clubs, was a "top" salary. It is a mystery to me how my health stood it night after night, followed by a full day at business. There were two reasons for doing it: the first, that of necessity; the other of a born love of the "art of acting."

From being only a club actor I became known to better outside companies and got special engagements with them, earning as

much as a guinea a night. Then I felt a real full-blown leading man. I eventually became my own manager, and Bransby Williams's Company began to make headway, so much so that some of the less thoughtful rival histrions — when I was becoming popular enough to get work outside—wrote all sorts of unkind things under assumed names. I mention this, because they were such bad prophets. One wrote and said, "The sooner this young man enters *THE* profession, the better—for the sooner he will find his level at the bottom." Many such things were written in their journal. Several of them are still grovelling at the bottom, and I have generally maintained a kindly dignity near the top, and have always tried to be kind to all I knew in those days.

The only thing I never tackled in my early career was Shakespeare; but there was one company I remember that played Shakespeare—irrespective of scenery—and many enthusiasts played with them. I was present in a large club that possessed a stage and scenery, when *Hamlet* was played one Sunday night by many actors whose names

are known to-day. That night, Miss Ellen Terry graced the front and saw her daughter play "Ophelia." The chairman was smoking his pipe, and started the show by tapping his hammer and calling "Silence, please, for 'Amlet!"

There was one gentleman who ran a company, for whom I generally played leading parts. A working men's club was started in this neighbourhood, and instead of engaging a different company every week, the club arranged with him for a show each week. I think I played each Tuesday night for forty weeks, and I suppose appeared in quite thirty different characters. What wonders were worked on that very small stage! Our repertoire stretched from a small farce to *The Octoroon*, *Colleen Bawn*, etc. I have played in drawing-room plays with ordinary kitchen tables and chairs as furniture, and yet we had to convince the audience that we really were in earnest. Nowadays the young gentleman from the dramatic schools must have everything on the stage of the best—furniture from so and so, tapestry from some one else, dresses from another, naming, of course, the fashionable

shops dealing in these specialities. In fact, "realism" is a *sine qua non.* Yes, and I often wonder, when I see some of these gentlemen sporting themselves as "actors" in many West End theatres, what they would have done in the old days, learning new parts every week, playing in "stock," having to be up in all Shakespeare's plays, and always ready. Now they play "naturally," it is called, and not one in a hundred can go on for a character. They simply continue to impersonate *themselves*, and then arrange when to meet for golf. There was no time for golf in those days—every minute was wanted for "study."

I once produced a new one-act play, and played in *Camille* on the same night at a Radical club in Paddington. Fancy *Camille* in five acts and a one-act play on a club stage! I had a most distinguished audience, or rather one member of it was, for Mr. Forbes Robertson, that charming man and glorious actor—probably the finest "Hamlet" of the generation—sat in front. He gave me some most encouraging advice.

At this same club I once was playing a triple bill, and in one piece was supposed to

eat a steak pudding. Included in the usual property list I sent in was this item: "large basin made to look like pudding, knives and forks, etc., and table laid." Imagine my surprise when a real good smoking hot steak and kidney pudding arrived for the scene. "My eye!" I exclaimed to myself. I had to cut it and serve it, and in the ordinary course of this stage meal we should have got through it in about five or six minutes; but this night I made up my mind that that pudding should not be wasted, but eaten, so I commenced in earnest. I made a real meal, and gagged and gagged to get time. The audience simply yelled when they realized the joke. The pudding had been made and brought over by a member's wife. It was a huge success, and the smell of that pudding seemed to make the entire audience sniff and long for home and supper. That pudding was a standing joke for many months.

Soon after I had made my appearance on the halls I was invited to meet some of the members of this club, and spent an hour among them. To my great surprise, the few men who were connected with its stage had

subscribed together in order to present me with a silver match-box, with some nice things engraved on it. I was very proud of it, and it is now among many other valued little souvenirs I have received since. The continual playing in these clubs made one almost ready for any emergency, and enabled one to get a considerable stock of parts in one's memory, and so I have never regretted the many experiences and hardships I encountered as an actor in working men's clubs.

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER ACTING IN PLAYS—STRUGGLING DAYS

I ACTED what I may call my first real serious part in a play at the New Cross Public Hall, where the public used to resort for entertainment long before Mr. Oswald Stoll had commenced the business of building his palatial local Empire. I was introduced to the gentleman then running popular shows on Saturdays and Mondays. He had a fine dramatic company round him. Several clever people who have done well since, played there. The performance in question was *The Colleen Bawn*. I was to play a servant, with about two lines to speak. At the last moment, however, Mr. Vivian Reynolds (now stage manager to George Alexander) was unable to play. He was *the* star of the show, and cast for "Danny Mann." He was billed, I believe, as Hermann Vezin's successful pupil,

"Being in a bit of a 'ole," as Bill Adams has it, the manager came to me and asked me if I could learn Mr. Reynolds's part. I had never before spoken more than a few lines, and *this* —this was a part! I said yes, of course, and set to work promptly to learn it. There was only time for one rehearsal, but I did the best I could, and made a big success; so big, in fact, that at the end of the play the audience remained in the building calling for "Danny Mann." At last the manager led me forward, and I shall never forget the surprise of the audience. I was only a boy, wearing a short black jacket and Eton collar. There was silence for a moment, and then an extra cheer. And so I played my first big part. I received an Abernethy biscuit, a bottle of ginger beer, and one shilling for my fare! Ye gods! What a salary!

Somehow or other it was fated that I should play a run of Dion Boucicault; and my next chance was to play "Michael Feeny" in *Arrah Na-Pogue*, this time at the Balham Assembly Rooms. During the rehearsals I suggested some "business," which seemed to astonish the stage manager, but he said nothing.

A little while afterwards an old man and woman—poor supers—who had seen better days, called me aside, and asked me where I had got my idea of the part and the business of the scene from. I told them I had seen the piece when I was a little boy at the Standard Theatre, Shoreditch—once a fine old London theatre. Then they understood ; but they could not understand how I had remembered it so accurately. It is strange, but even now I can see that performance, and I could not possibly have been more than seven years old at the time. I played it with great success, and the *Era*, in the first notice I ever remember, said, "Michael Feeny was played by a young actor, new to us, who shows promise of strong work. He is a worthy successor to the famous Shiel Barry in this part." I received five shillings per night for my labours.

My next Boucicault experience was as "Harvey Duff" in *The Shaughraun*, which took place at the Theatre Royal, Edmonton. Several things come back to me as I write ; one in particular is that I was considered good in make-up and gesture. But my voice was weak, and I overheard a remark, "What

a pity! no voice!" This burned itself into my brain, and made me set about trying to see if, by deep breathing and practice and observation, I could develop a voice. Another incident I remember was in the scene where "Harvey Duff" waits under the prison wall for "Conn." On this particular night there was a delay in the arrival of "Conn," and I began filling out the wait with business. I was looking at my carbine, and gagging a little, when suddenly "Conn," in an unexpected manner, *arrived*—in two senses of the word. He not only appeared on the scene, but fell from the wall on my shoulders. The carbine was at the moment pointed to my face, and as "Conn" lumbered on to me the muzzle entered my mouth. Had my head not gone backwards the carbine must have pierced my throat and come out at the back of my neck. But fortune favoured me to an extent, although the roof of my mouth was torn and a fine front tooth was lost. This was the most realistic scene I have ever played in. At the end of that week, instead of receiving my salary I received a very nice letter of *thanks* and excuses in its stead. Thus I worked the whole week and

received even less than for my first Boucicault experience. As the old actor says, "Ah, my lad! we don't get much money—but, ye gods! we do have a time! Ha, ha!"

I had another Boucicault experience when playing *Grimaldi; or The Life of an Actress*, by this same great actor and author. It took place in Hackney at the old Manor Assembly Rooms. I was running the company myself, and in the last act the scene opens with an old woman, very deaf, who is left with the heroine by the villain in a very lonely house. The old woman, it will be remembered, has a good scene, and tells the girl, "if she wants anything to call. I shan't hear you, but the dogs will bark, and I shall hear them!" The lady playing this part was ill, and was unable to go on. There was nothing for it but for me (I was playing "Old Grimaldi") to double the characters and make up as a different old man, and play the character as a man instead of as a woman. This I did, in a very weak and tremulous tone, and had an awful rush to be ready for my own entrance as "Grimaldi." I managed it all right, and all went off very successfully.

At the end of the show the old manager, who was a great character in his way—a sort of Mrs. Malaprop, who always put his "h's" in and dropped them out as he thought fit—came round behind, and in a very pompous manner, too, which made me feel at once that something was coming, said, "Bransby, my boy, hi ham very pleased with the show—it's gone hoff hall right; but mind what hi'm telling you. You har very good, very good hindeed; but a word hin your hear—look hout for the man as played the deaf chap; he'll wipe you hout. Now mind, hi've told you—he's beat you hall to a standstill to-night." When it was explained to him that I had doubled the parts, he was more than delighted, because, he said, nothing escaped him. "*He* knew it was no hordinary man." He was a right good sort to me often, and in after years I think the old chap really thought he had founded my fortunes.

Another time I was playing *Grimaldi* in the suburbs, and was in business during the day, and used to rush to catch trains. In the morning I was compelled to get up sometimes about five o'clock. On this occasion it was

in the depth of winter; and how the bed did pull! I was sharing a room with an old pro., who was *not* in business during the day, as I was, so that he could lie in bed till about nine o'clock in the morning, by which time I was at business. I got up, this particular morning I am thinking of, and as I left the room I said, "Good morning, old chap;" and he answered as he turned over and drew the clothes comfortably round him, "Good *night*, my lad—good *night!*" He was halfway through *his* night, and I was beginning my day!

Another experience of struggling days resulted from my answering an advertisement in *The Stage:* "Wanted, Juvenile and Character man for four nights." I applied for *both* parts, with the chance of getting one. I was engaged to play juvenile lead—"Harry" something—in a piece called *Not Guilty.* My salary was to be thirty shillings for rehearsals and work. Anyway, it was something to do, and it was Christmas, and I was "out." I attended rehearsal in a room in 408, Strand. In passing up the stairs I call to mind a suite of offices belonging to a man whose name is pretty well a household word in this

country, owing to his company and his wonderful advertisements of *A Royal Divorce* — I mean, of course, W. W. Kelly. I will not mention the name of the gentleman who was running the show, but will call him Mr. "Easygo." His company was a motley crew. Of course you would not expect a very bright crowd for four nights, and at Christmas time. An old actor rehearsed us, and was as old-fashioned and conventional as it is possible to imagine. He was playing a rough character part, and in one scene had to meet me in a "knife fight." I was always enthusiastic and conscientious in my work, and approached him regarding the "knives" to be used, telling him that I should not be afraid even of razors, or stilettoes if he were going to do the usual give and take, holding wrists, etc. He glared at me, and said, "Boy, how dare you try to teach me what I knew when you were reposing in the cradle! Silence, 'Hambone!'" which, of course, is the polite epithet for "Amateur." It was a dreary time—rehearsals, no money, and cold weather; in addition to which the large room in 408, Strand was very dull and miserable.

I may mention in passing that years elapsed, and the next time I entered this same room it was a nicely furnished, comfortable place, and I was shown in as a "star" to sign a contract for more pounds a week than I was then receiving shillings. What a change! and what feelings are mine as I sit and think of those days—days of hard work, when there was any work, and hope against hope when there was none! However, let's keep to the subject.

We got through rehearsals, and found that Mr. "Easygo" had been rehearsing another company which was to play *Queen of Diamonds*. We were sent to Sittingbourne, and the other company went to Hounslow. Mr. "Easygo" came with us, and was playing the part of the judge in the big trial scene, and in the early part of the show he looked after the front of the house, and took care nobody paid twice to come in. The opening night arrived. The place was packed. The show went well —all went well—till the duel scene. I met the old actor, and he had not the slightest repose, but mouthed and stamped around like a savage, and when the fight commenced I

found he simply used brute strength, and went for me in real earnest. Had I not tackled him quickly and firmly, I think I should have been fatally wounded. Halfway through he cut my hand, leaving a mark I carry to this day. I then set about the gentleman, and only released his hold by actually biting his hand.

First night over, and every one pleased. I went to my lodging, an awful little back room in a very poor house, and a single candle for light. Oh, how I thought of home! And how "merry I was, I don't think." "I don't think" is an ejaculation we hear so often now, and may sound modern streetified slang; but it is not new, for this expression is used by Sam Weller in "Pickwick," and also by Martin Chuzzlewit—so, gentle reader, forgive me.

The next night the piece was repeated to another good house. Just before the last act, Mr. "Easygo" was nowhere to be found, and consequently there was no judge for the trial scene. There was no one to go on for it either. "We must have a judge." "Who will do——?" "Who can do it?" were the questions in the

air. A lady who was very versatile and had a good strong voice offered. I volunteered, if the lady did not object, to make her up for the part. She was a brick, and allowed me to line her face and stick side whiskers on. Then she donned the wig and robes, and all was well. She played it excellently, and the sentence of the judge was listened to amidst rapt silence by the unsuspecting audience. When the show was over, we still missed Mr. "Easygo," and later on found the gentleman had *easily gone*, and with him all the money. We could do nothing but wait for morning events.

It so happened that the advance manager of the other company, *Queen of Diamonds*, arrived, and from him we got our fares to Hounslow. The *Queen* Company was to take our place at Sittingbourne, and we were to go to Hounslow. After many strange happenings, we arrived there and found no Mr. "Easygo," but all the *Queen of Diamonds* scenery. This piece was a play with mostly Parisian interiors, and *Not Guilty* was a melodrama with dock scene, farm scene, court scene, etc. Now came the time for some one

to shine. I was the youngest member of the company, had been roughing it, and was up to almost any emergency, so I proposed that we made up our minds to *show*, whatever else happened. We would do our best with the scenery, and make shift here and there. We turned one scene with plain back to the audience, and made it serve for prison and court scene. Next we wired to town to a man—a well-known man—who we knew had something to do with this company. He at once sent some one to take the money. He thought us all simpletons to send for any one for such a job as that! Oh no, he had not the least objection to that part of the business. Meanwhile, I had had one of my first tastes of what poverty and suffering poor strollers occasionally endure. Our company was poor —almost penniless. The old man who had spoken to me of a "Hambone," poor old fellow, had his wife in the show, and I found them with literally nothing but a "Hambone." They had picked it clean, and it had been their only food for two days. I had very little myself, but shared that little with them, and left myself my fare to town from Hounslow.

Night arrived, and the man was at the door taking the money. I was deputed by the company to help them out by a speech, so before the play commenced, I went on, and in a few words appealed to the audience to let us do our best, as the scenery had gone "astray"; but with their kind consideration and attention we would nevertheless endeavour to give them a good show, etc. They applauded, and from that moment we were heroes. All went well. At the end of the third act we sent for the "money-taker." He innocently walked into our room, and the door was closed behind him. "Now," said we, "we want some money before we go any further." You should have seen his face. We were not long in getting some of the needful, and the show finished. But I must tell one more incident. I was dressed as a convict in the trial scene, in order to save time, but had an ordinary coat on. I held up a frame of painted canvas that in another scene was used as a large mirror. In this scene I stood with it in front of me as the prisoner's dock, and it effectually hid my lower extremities. When sentence was passed on me,

however, I forgot to keep hold of it, and threw up both my hands. "I am innocent, my lord, innocent I swear!" I cried—and down went the prisoner's dock, showing my legs already encased in breeches well marked with the broad arrow. You can just imagine the roar that went up when they saw me already as a convict before my trial, and still protesting my innocence!

I caught my train, which took me to Whitechapel Road. There were no more trams, and I had to walk home to Clapton. No cabs for me in those days! It poured with rain, and I landed home unexpectedly, and my wife cooked me a sort of breakfast and supper; but to me it was a banquet!

I have often thought of the show *Not Guilty*, and one or two of the people connected with it whom I have met since. I never pass 408, Strand without thinking of it. Mr. "Easygo" has had many ups and downs since then, but he has never had the opportunity of re-engaging "Yours truly."

A more recent experience of being a Jack of all Trades occurred on my return from America at Christmas, 1907. I was engaged

to appear at the London Hippodrome and play *Scrooge*, which I had rearranged to suit the ring and the stage. Boxing Day arrived, and Frank Parker, the famous stage manager and producer, so long the "boss" of so many productions, was in an awful state. The principal boy, Miss Lelia Roze, who was to appear as the Prince, was taken ill and unable to appear. It was a dreadful predicament to be in on such a day, and in such a production. I was approached to assist them out of the difficulty. It certainly was novel—a man to play "Prince Charming," and at such short notice. But no sooner said than done—I undertook to do my best.

The next thing was, what could we do for a costume? Boxing Day, and no costumiers open, and the pretty dress made for so stately and shapely a lady as Miss Lelia Roze was out of the question. A sudden idea—Lewis Waller! I thought perhaps Lewis Waller would lend me one of his "Beaucaire" dresses, as he was playing *Robin Hood;* so off I ran, and found Mr. Waller making up. I explained I was to go on for "Principal Boy." He laughed, and I think imagined I was

playing a joke. I soon convinced him, and like a true "pal" he said, "Go on, get whatever you like from my wardrobe;" and I was soon supplied with a court dress, intending the part to be played as a sort of "Charles Surface," as we could get nothing else that would do.

Meanwhile, my dresser had sought out my perruquier, Gustave, from his private retreat, and he had opened his shop and got a nice white court wig dressed and brought it back. Now, so far, the dressing part was all right. But in about an hour I was to appear before the public, and had not yet attempted the learning of the "words" of the part. Whilst I was making up for my part of "Scrooge," I learned the words of "Prince Charming." About twenty minutes after I had left the stage as a dirty old man (Scrooge), I was making my appearance as "Prince Charming," surrounded by a bevy of pretty girls in "Honeyland." I don't think I missed a line—I even "gagged" fairly well. It was a strange experience, listening to a love-song sung by the Princess to me. "All's well," however, "that ends well," and at the end

of the performance I received the congratulations of all the company, and Frank Parker thanked me almost with tears in his eyes.

I was spending Christmas at Churt, Frensham Pond—near Farnham—with my family and Mr. S. F. Edge, the well-known motor expert, and motored back at night.

Next morning I received a wire from Frank Parker: "Dear friend, can you oblige and play principal boy again to-day?" So I had to appear four times a day at the Hippodrome—twice as Scrooge and twice in pantomime. I did this for three days, and received at the end of the week—the "*Thanks*" of the management; but I knew that Frank Parker was ever grateful.

I remember meeting Sir Charles Wyndham at the time, and he thought I was joking when I told him it was the truth, "Scrooge" and "Fairy Prince" in one show; he offered his heartiest congratulations on what he considered a feat of versatility.

When Miss Roze returned and took up her part, she was very grateful for the little service I had rendered her, and presented me with a diamond scarf-pin, which act I appreciated

very greatly. Somehow or other a notice appeared in a certain evening paper giving credit for these appearances to some one else. I contradicted the same, and quoted "Salem Scudder" in *The Octoroon* when he said, "The camera could not lie." You see, it so happened that flashlight pictures had been taken while I was playing, and the reader can see how Bransby Williams appeared as "Scrooge" and "Prince Charming" at the Hippodrome, Christmas, 1907.

One little joke during my appearances was that the call boy used to call "Mr. Williams, please," in his loud voice when I was due as Scrooge, but when I was due as Prince Charming he tapped at the door, and, in a piping treble voice, called "*Miss* Williams, please! ! ! "

One more incident of the days gone by before I close this chapter. Many years ago, when I was still a poor young struggling mummer, I saved a poor little girl from death in a fire, with the details of which I do not intend to harrow my readers. The poor child died a short time after the rescue, in the hospital. At the inquest I was sought out,

Photo. by] [*Campbell-Gray, Ltd.*

SCENE FROM "HONEYLAND" AT LONDON HIPPODROME—BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS PRINCE CHARMING.

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and had to give evidence. I was naturally upset at having to view the body of the poor child. At the end of the inquest the coroner and jury commended me for my conduct, and a report of the proceedings appeared in all the papers. My name, of course, was entirely unknown, yet imagine my surprise when I received a kindly letter from no other than Sir W. S. Gilbert, the famous Savoyard. He wished to thank me, he said, and assured me that anything he could do for me he would. I was deeply interested at the time in "Dan'l Druce," a character in his play of that name, and told him so, adding that I would like to play it for my benefit—I needed one at the time, I assure you. He willingly lent me the play free of all charges, which I considered a real kindness of a great man to an entirely unknown actor, as I then was, and I've never forgotten it. "Thanks, again," Sir W. S. Gilbert.

CHAPTER V

MY FIRST MUSIC-HALL ENGAGEMENT—IMITATION OF ACTORS

My first appearance in a music hall was on August 26, 1896, at The London, Shoreditch, under the management of E. S. Barnes. During the previous week I had written to the latter, explaining that I was an actor out of work—I had done various things, but could give him a show of Imitations of Popular Actors. He wrote, asking me to go up and see him and give him a show on a Saturday afternoon, with a view to my being an "extra turn." I arrived to find the theatre in almost darkness, save for the lights in the orchestra. Mr. Barnes was seated in the stalls, and with him the Two Bostons—a turn that was once famous—with their trained dogs and cats. Talking of cats reminds me that the audience was completed by a black cat, which, as

Photo. by] [*R. Vining.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS, AGED 26.

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everybody knows, the inhabitants of "Stage-land" always look upon as a good omen.

I had to summon up courage, and give a show in cold blood. I had given two or three imitations of famous actors, and was proceeding with another, when, in a very abrupt tone which frightened me completely, Barnes called out, "That'll do!" I left the stage absolutely "done." As I passed out I said to the stage manager, "My first and last appearance on a music-hall stage!" I was walking out, very depressed, for I was certain I had not made a good impression, when I was called back—"Mr. Barnes wants to see you!" was the order. When I met Barnes, he said, "My boy—great! Too good for a Saturday night—come here for an extra turn on Thursday night, when you will find a good audience." You can never imagine my surprise when I found that his sharp "That'll do!" was satisfaction, and not disgust.

Thursday night seemed ages coming along, as I was in very low water at the time, with a wife and a little daughter to keep. At last it did arrive. My wife and my old friend, who shall be called Bob, accompanied

me—we did *not* have a brougham or a cab, but a penny tram ride. I carried my wigs, etc., in a piece of brown paper, and made my way to the "dressing-room," such as it was—for all parts were occupied, and I had really to dress outside on the landing. Anyhow, it didn't matter. No one took any more notice of me than they would of an outsider or an intruder. Nothing mattered then, but one thing—I was longing for a chance. My turn came. I walked on, and never was so nervous in my life—I could hardly see, and was almost deaf with nervousness, and my heart nearly beat my head off. Very soon I realized I was being applauded. This gave me life. I thought of my wife and bairn, and the necessity of work and money. I did my very utmost to please; and when I had finished, the cheers and applause made the tears roll down my cheeks. I had taken several calls, and the audience still shouted. At last Mr. Barnes came running round, more excited than I had ever been, and led me on the stage, and shook my hands. That simply finished it, and the audience yelled the louder and called for a

speech. I was speechless—not in the accepted meaning of the term—so I was greatly relieved when, at last, Mr. Barnes obtained silence, and then without a word to me, thanked them for himself; then on my behalf; and made the announcement that I would join the regular programme on Monday evening. Then another cheer, and I once more made my bow and retired, to receive the congratulations of several who, a few moments before, had sneered at the intruder. What a night! My wife and I shed tears of joy, and I had the grip of my pal Bob's hand, that had ever been ready in earlier and less successful days. On the next Sunday, the following appeared in the *Referee* :—

"London Theatre of Varieties, etc., etc.

First appearance on the Variety Stage
of
BRANSBY WILLIAMS,
The Actor Mimic,
In the following impersonations :—

HARRY PAULTON,
E. S. WILLARD,
BEERBOHM TREE,
HENRY IRVING,
and
SHIEL BARRY, etc., etc."

Such was my first appearance on a music-hall stage, and the public have been my dearest friends ever since. In another chapter I tell how I deputized for Dan Leno at the Tivoli and the Paragon, and how I appeared at four halls before the week was over. Well, I worked a night here and two there, etc. Anyhow, on the Saturday, my *first* Saturday in music halls, I had eighteen sovereigns to draw; and the week before eighteen shillings would have been a godsend. Some one had suggested that I might get over-excited and might drink; so my pal Bob was told off to meet me, but I didn't need looking after. I changed my sovereigns, or about ten of them, into silver, and went home with bulging pockets. My dear wife was in bed, and I ran up and poured the money on to the bed in shillings, half-crowns, and small money, and finished with the gold. Such moments of exquisite joy of success can never be repeated, and I shall never forget my first taste of the sweets of success. Before concluding this portion of my story I must relate that Teddy Barnes afterwards left London and did so badly that he failed, and went down in the

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

MRS. BRANSBY WILLIAMS.

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world. He fell so low that a small sum I was glad to send him got him his Christmas dinner. I think he just lived to spend that money, and died. I was always thankful that I was able to do something, and that something at the end, when he took his last call.

Talking of imitations, I was on the programme at Leeds, playing my Shakespearean characters, and on the Saturday there was a big matinée in aid of the hospitals. I was asked to appear, and the manager suggested I should do something to liven things up a bit. I proposed something to him, and he promised not to give me away. Everything was going well—turn after turn succeeded, and the huge audience were in for a good time and the hospitals for a goodly sum. During the show the manager walked on and thanked them for their support, and announced that an old friend who had assisted them the year before had come from town to help them now. The well-known opening bars of music and the dash on of R. G. Knowles, with his battered hat and white trousers—was the cue for a great reception! Gags went banging away in his usual rapid style, and every

one was entering into the spirit of the show, when, suddenly lifting the hat and wig, and dropping the assumed voice—R. G. Knowles was no other than your humble servant, B. W. At first, the audience were silent and surprised, and then, seeing the joke, gave me one of the biggest receptions I ever remember.

Although my imitations have been as successful as my impersonations of characters from Dickens and Shakespeare, there was one notable judge of such things who prophesied my failure. I speak elsewhere of the encouragement I received at different times from J. L. Toole, William Terriss, Clement Scott, and others. But this one man to whom I refer, a man of great renown and of usually sure judgment, Charles Morton, the father of the halls, could see nothing in me. He knew what a success I was making all over London, and every one said, "The very thing for the Palace!" He wanted convincing, so asked for a private trial show, and I, being anxious to do well, went to the Palace and suffered the agony of a performance to the old man and the band. He saw nothing in me or my show worthy

of the Palace. Years went on, and I went on improving, I hope; at any rate, popular favour was mine.

I met Charles Morton again, and said, "Well, governor, you see I'm still at it! Now, I can come with you next year. What do you say?" He simply replied, "My dear boy—too late! You're worn out now and everybody's had you—so you'd be no good for the Palace." Well, he was not alone in his opinion, for every agent who offered me at the Palace was refused, and I have been only to benefits there—but have always found the audience appreciative.

CHAPTER VI

HOW I BECAME A DICKENS ACTOR

I AM often asked how it was I became a Dickens actor, and why? To say I was a Dickensian as a boy, of course, is hardly correct, because I do not think that any one as a boy quite feels the influence of Dickens as a great student of human nature—which is the salient point of his genius. The boy reads Dickens, and enjoys "Oliver Twist" and "David Copperfield" and "Great Expectations" chiefly because they are good stories. It is the young man out in the world who begins to realize what great things Dickens accomplished by his writings. It is only then that he finds what a superb creator of character he was, and how wonderful was his observation of trivial details in a man's looks and habits.

I was a young man when I started to re-read Dickens, to study him in earnest and

BRANSBY WILLIAMS

BOOKLAND

A PICTORIAL POSTER.

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Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS JOHN WILLET.

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS OLD RUDGE.

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begin to understand his splendid powers. I have already told various stories of my beginnings as an actor and music-hall performer; but in this chapter I want, if I can, to make the reader to see how I became a Dickens actor.

As an entertainer, I was not content to do one thing well; I wanted to do many. I was not satisfied just to sing a song as a "Nigger" comedian! I had also to give a stump speech and do some lightning sketches on the board, and no doubt, if I had been allowed, would have chipped in with a clog dance, done a banjo turn, and taken all the parts in a sketch. Even when I sang character songs I always felt I wanted to be funny as well as pathetic. In a word, I had a great longing to be versatile, even though I had not the power to be so. But it was that longing, perhaps, which impressed upon my mind that to be an actor in the true sense of the word was to be versatile.

About this time, with all these ideas in my head, I remember, I had an opportunity of seeing Macabe—the great Fred Macabe, a wonderful single-handed performer, doing all the characters in a piece himself; and later on I saw a man named Fleming Norton, who

also did a whole show by himself. This imbued me with a desire to go and do likewise, and I made a start by impersonating all the persons I met at a party. Whether they were life-like impersonations I cannot say now, but this I can say, that I enjoyed myself immensely, and gained some little experience by it. The craving to do something big all off my own bat continued throughout these years, and I suppose it is more or less the ambition of every actor some time or another. During this time I was always reading Dickens's works, and slowly but surely I began to realize what great living characters were all these people of his brain! No mere figures of straw, but real living personalities, who gradually became to the reader his very friends, so to speak. All their little idiosyncracies, all their sayings and doings, their very temperaments, developed by their own words and actions, lifted them from lay figures in a book into human beings whom we felt were real friends. That is one of the reasons of Dickens's greatness: he has created men and women for us who are as real and living as any men and women who have walked the

earth. And the idea seemed to come to me all at once, that if these characters were all this to me, they must also be as well known to the rest of the world, and that being so, why not present them with their peculiarities, their pathos and humour and tragedy, in the flesh upon the stage? These were the thoughts which remained in my mind for a time, and whilst I was a small entertainer, and afterwards whilst I was acting in the provinces. Then came my first appearance on the music-hall stage as a mimic, and the idea became still more imbedded in my mind.

As a mimic I had a chance of doing several characters as played by others; but I found, however clever one might be as a mimic, one is looked on not as an originator, but as a parrot. When we see an amateur actor giving imitations of great men, we find ourselves thinking, "Well, if so-and-so was like that, he would never have made the name he has done," like the story told of so many. The same story, indeed, is told of Toole, and nowadays of Nat Goodwin, who saw a mimic do a scene of his, and afterwards remarked, "Say, one of us is rotten!" However, after having

succeeded as a mimic, I felt that I could do something better, and thought again of the Dickens idea. And so I studied Dickens more and more, and became more and more astonished at his wonderful characters. One day an uncle of mine was talking, and said he remembered Clarence Holt playing some of Dickens's characters. That seemed to settle it for me. If he had succeeded, I would too; and I set about dramatizing his books and making monologues and sketches out of his characters. After a time I tried some of them with success; and how I have succeeded is for the ever indulgent public to say. It is their kindness and appreciation of my efforts, combined with the great humanity of Dickens, that have given me the position, such as it is, I now hold in the dramatic world. Little did I think that I should ever be a popular favourite as a portrayer of Dickens's characters. Less did I think I should have the honour of seeing a book of mine published by the famous Dickens publishers, so well known all over the world as Chapman and Hall, whose interest even to-day in everything connected with the great writer is as lively as ever.

The interest taken in these character impersonations is shown by the requests for them in all parts of the country, and the many letters I receive concerning them.

In my early efforts I had great difficulty in persuading theatrical agents that the public would appreciate the idea, for it was the fashion then to sneer at Dickens, and to say he was only for the lower classes. Besides which, when I spoke of Little Nell and her Grandfather, it was suggested that Sunday-school ideas are not wanted in music halls. If ever it were true that Dickens was considered low (which I beg respectfully to doubt), it is not so now. Everybody reads him now, the rich, the poor, the prince, and the pauper; and Dickens stands out as the one Victorian novelist whose books can never die or become "old-fashioned." When many great men of history are forgotten, his characters will still be alive, and generation upon generation will continue to make the acquaintance of some of the best of friends and companions in his books, and derive greater joy from that friendship than they may from those of real flesh and blood.

As to being old-fashioned, why, they are to be met with in all our daily walks; and if a time does come—which is not likely—when such personages have no living parallel, the works of Dickens will have to be read as mirroring the manners and customs of a bygone day, and historians of England will use his books by the yard to indicate the temperament of the people and the characteristics of the time and race.

Perhaps my first real acquaintance with Dickens's works was at school, when "Barnaby Rudge" was chosen as the book to be read to us. As a child I was deeply interested in it, and afterwards I became a young reader of the rest of his world-famed works. One day, later in life, I cycled out to Chigwell and paid a visit to the "King's Head," the hostelry used by Dickens as the "Maypole" in this book. I always wanted to see it, but somehow my visit was put off and off until I was determined to delay no longer. Although there is no doubt that this was the house Dickens described as the "Maypole" of "Barnaby Rudge," many people even now seek out quite a modern place called the "Maypole," which does not coincide with

the picturesque description in the story. On the occasion of my visit I introduced myself to the landlord—the modern Willet. He just stared at me and said, "Well, that's funny—I saw you last night at the Tivoli." We soon became very friendly, and he showed me all over the place; and before I left I had made up my mind to attempt the novelty of playing the very characters of the book in the very place they were set by the novelist. As soon as I could I set to work and dramatized suitable monologues of the principal actors in the story, fixed a date, and arranged the performance in aid of the "*Daily Telegraph* Soldiers' Widows and Orphans Fund." I had the assistance, for my concert part of the programme, of the most notable people of the time—such a programme, I venture to think, had never before been given in a country village hotel. Appended is a copy, and it will be seen that included in the array of talent was Dan Leno, who was at that time the greatest little man on the public stage, as well as such names as Herbert Campbell, Eugene Stratton, Fred Russell, and Frank Lawton. The whole performance was a great success.

DICKENS HALL, Adjoining the King's Head Hotel. CHIGWELL,

Generously lent by WALTER LEWIS, Esq.

This Hotel was known in the novel of "Barnaby Rudge," as "THE MAYPOLE."

MR. BRANSBY WILLIAMS'S

CHARLES DICKENS MATINEE.

Extract from "Barnaby Rudge"—

"'The Maypole'—by which term from henceforth is meant the house and not its sign."

In aid of the "DAILY TELEGRAPH" SOLDIERS' WIDOWS AND ORPHANS FUND.

Commence at 2 o'clock sharp.

PROGRAMME.

"THE CHARLES DICKENS MATINEE," The old MAYPOLE INN, Tuesday, May 22nd, 1900.

1. Pianoforte Solo "Andante Cappricioso" *Asher*
   ANGELO A. ASHER.
2. LEO STORMONT ... ... Baritone.
3. HERBERT CAMPBELL ... Popular Favourite.
4. MISS ANNETTE FENGLER Coon Song.
5. FRED RUSSELL, and his inimitable "Coster Joe."
6. MISS LIL HAWTHORNE... Popular American Artiste.
7. DAN LENO ... ... The Great Comedian.
8. MISS GEORGINA LENO ... Song.
9. EUGENE STRATTON ... The Great Coon.
10. FRANK LAWTON ... ... The Popular Whistler.
    From *The Belle of New York.*

11. MR. BRANSBY WILLIAMS, the Popular Dickens Actor, in a Miscellaneous Selection of CHARACTERS FROM DICKENS, during which MISS GEORGINA LENO will sing the old song, "LITTLE NELL."
12. MR. BRANSBY WILLIAMS will appear in a short Selection of Characters from "BARNABY RUDGE," who have all lived and moved and had their being on this very spot, "The Maypole," specially written and adapted for this Matinée.
13. MISS EDYTHE KEMP will sing

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.

My old and valued friend, Mr. H. Chance Newton, wrote a special address for the occasion, which I recited. It ran as follows:—

AN ADDRESS

Written by MR. H. CHANCE NEWTON for MR. BRANSBY WILLIAMS'S Dickens Fête, at the King's Head (Old Maypole Inn), Chigwell,

On Tuesday, May 22nd, 1900,

In aid of *The Daily Telegraph* Fund for our Soldiers' Widows and Orphans.

"Here at the Maypole (which is Chigwell way)
A Dickens Festival we hold to-day;
'Tis for that Cause which he did e'er befriend;
That Cause for which his works were always penned—
The Cause of Charity. To-day we plead
For wives and bairns of men who for us bleed,
For Warriors' widows and their orphans we
Humbly submit our two hours' revelry,
Set forth in song and sketch and harmless jest,
From kindly-hearted artistes of the best.

"Here, nigh leafy Epping's woodland glades,
The Master's characters stalk by, like shades.
Poor idiot Barnaby, who yet could pray
When from his suffering mother torn away;
Grim Maypole Hugh, the Gipsy Child of Shame;
Who never knew a father's love, nor name;
Brave Edward Chester—brother to poor Hugh—
Their father, stern Sir John, to both untrue.
The traitor Gashford, setting fires aglow;
Arch Dolly Varden, the beloved of Joe;
Joe Willet who, on Love and Loyalty bent,
To the 'Salwanners when the war was,' went;
The mincing Miggs, most eager to adore
Sim Tappertit, who yearned for human gore;
Dennis the Hangman who, with cruel scoff,
Would gladly pinion folk and 'work 'em off';
The persecuted Haredale, strong of will,
And loving Emma, faithful through all ill.

"All these and more, haunt here (and every part)
Illumined by Charles Dickens and his art—
Some of these living figures from his page
We'd show to-day upon our mimic stage.
And lo, anon, ere townward ye repair,
We'd fain present to you that Empty Chair—
Wherein at Gadshill, and near this abode—
Charles Dickens laboured till his pages glowed.

"Some sniffing scoffers would his works pooh-pooh,
Perhaps *because* he loved the Good and True—
No Ibsen he, to praise the lawless wife,
Nor preach despair unto the Smikes of Life.
Our Dickens taught the blessings of 'These Three,'
Pure Faith, Glad Hope and (best) True Charity!"

I played during that afternoon Sir John Chester, Maypole Hugh, Joe Willet, John

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SIR JOHN CHESTER.

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS "MAYPOLE" HUGH.

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Willet, Solomon Daisy, and Barnaby Rudge, in addition to several characters from other books. The amount realized in that small place for the fund was one hundred guineas.

There afterwards appeared, in *The Royal Magazine*, an interesting article entitled "In the Footsteps of Barnaby Rudge." It was illustrated by pictures of my impersonations of the various characters, taken with the real background—such as Solomon Daisy going in at the church gate, as pictured by the novelist. By permission of the proprietors I am able to reproduce several of them here.

I was presented on the occasion with one of the famous old oak chairs from the now famous "Chester Room." And I afterwards had the honour of having hung in the same room a large painting of myself in the character of Barnaby Rudge, which I presented to Mr. Walter Lewis, the present landlord, for his kindness to me. It was altogether a red-letter day, and Mr. Lewis and I became real friends. I shall never forget the very pleasant and happy real Dickens Christmas I and my wife and family spent there. Mr. Lewis closed the place altogether for Christmas Day, and the

Chester Room was our cosy corner. We burned logs all day, and drank a bowl of punch to the memory of the great apostle of Christmas—Charles Dickens.

"The Maypole" entertainment was repeated the two following years in aid of the Music Hall Benevolent Society. The programmes included such names as Dan Leno, Herbert Campbell, Gus Elen, George Mozart, Ben Nathan, Harry Lauder, Millie Linden, and Bessie Bonehill, who made almost her *last* appearance before her death.

Barnaby's stick which I used was cut from a tree in the garden. I have carried it with me on all my journeys and tours. It was lost once, and only once—coming from London to Liverpool. It was traced to the luggage on board the *Oceanic*, but, alas! she had sailed for America. The next boat out was the *Lucania*. The baggage master of this boat followed with a message, which was delivered at the docks in New York. The stick was found and sent back by the next boat, the *Cedric*, arriving in Liverpool in time for me to play *Barnaby Rudge* at my benefit in the pantomime at the Shakespeare Theatre there. My stick has

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SOLOMON DAISY.

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS LORD GEORGE GORDON.

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since been to America with *me*, and has never again been allowed to gallivant there alone.

Nothing succeeds like success; and I suppose I am better known as "The Dickens Actor" than as anything else. And like all successful enterprises, mine has been copied by scores of other persons. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I presume I ought to feel hugely flattered. Being, too, an imitator of others, I cannot, I suppose, complain of being imitated in my own turn. But it does strike me sometimes as a little unfair, that concert artistes are permitted to sing the songs and to give recitals and monologues which belong to some one else—not only belong to them, but are the fruit of long study and work to perfect. Of course, at "smokers" and small concerts it is not of much consequence; but it surely is not "playing the game"—at least, so it seems to me. I may be very dense, but I cannot understand why a man, because he is called a "pierrot," should be allowed to sing and do another man's business without permission. If it is on a pier, the public pay for admission just the same as they do in a music hall, and yet

in one place this sort of thing is permitted, and in another it is not.

When I was doing "flying matinées," I appeared one night at a certain watering-place, where I was politely told not to do two or three of my numbers, as they were being done there daily! I, the original, was asked not to do what I had originated, but to substitute something they had not got.

It is strange at times, when you find some one admires you so much, and sends you a special request to do some particular piece, that the request is not prompted merely by admiration, but by the desire to be more perfect in it when he himself shall do it!

There are, at the present time, sixteen men and one woman who impersonate Dickens characters. Dickens is free to them all, if they will only use their own brains and dramatize and write their own shows. But all of them do not do this. In 1896 I was the only actor presenting Dickens on the stage, now there are many imitators; and what is more strange, they are so indifferent to the fact that they are copyists, that in course of time they think they have been the

originators themselves. One man who had an exact reproduction of one of my entertainments was a fair man, but this was not, he thought, quite correct, so he had a black wig made like my hair, in order that he could even be like me to that extent. The manager said to him one night, "You must admire Bransby Williams very much!" He answered, with a sort of startled look, "Bransby Williams? No, I've never heard of him. Does *he* do Dickens, then?" And this was a man who had carefully taken down my own words and noted my every movement!

Then there is the young enthusiast who does not even dream he is doing wrong in stealing—I can find no other word for it. If a novelist took another novelist's plot and characters and put them to his own use, redress could be got. If I took a carpenter's tools with which to earn my living, I should be accused of stealing. But it is not so when another's brain is stolen, or sucked dry, as happens nowadays. It is thought nothing of.

One young man wrote and told me he had got about nine of my characters perfect,

he thought, and he would be much obliged if I would send him the words of *Sydney Carton.* He further desired to know where he could get the dress, and could I send him an old wig. He would look in that evening if I would play it, as he liked me so much in it.

Another youth wrote and asked me for an old suit, or the loan of my Dickens dress, as he was about to start for himself. When I returned to the town to which he belonged, I found him the local hero and histrion, and known as the local Bransby Williams.

In preparing my character studies, I always make pencil sketches of the make-up, and provide my perruquier, Gustave, with all particulars of details. Sometimes I have spent months studying and boiling down material for just the length and strength needed. After having produced it, an ardent admirer will calmly go to the wig-maker or costumier for a copy of what he has just seen. The trouble in this part of the business is that managers engage "copyists" at small salaries, and then, when the "star" comes at a big salary, many in the audience think Jack is as good as his

master. As a matter of fact, a certain trade journal, which was never kindly disposed towards yours truly, made that comment of a local man in the North, who had politely purloined my show. We all can grow the flower, when once we get the seed.

Whilst on this subject I must tell how I myself have been alike charged by popular people, as well as by press men, with taking others' ideas. In 1896, my first year as a Dickens actor, I produced my monologue of Sydney Carton, and my monologue sketch of twenty minutes. Years after, I was accused of purloining my idea from Mr. Martin Harvey, who produced *The Only Way* some years later —the great and beautiful success of which is known all over the world. At Christmas of the same year, I produced my monologue entitled *Scrooge*, an adaptation of "A Christmas Carol," and have played it each Christmas since at two or three halls. During the Christmas season of 1907, eleven years after my first production of it, I was again billed to revive *Scrooge* at the London Hippodrome, having been away two seasons in pantomime. Judge, then, my surprise when I receive, a

day or two before I am to appear, a letter of which the following is an extract :—

"Aldwych Theatre, Dec. 18, 1907.

"DEAR SIR,

"I see that your Sketch at the Hippodrome is billed under the name of *Scrooge*. Now, *Scrooge* happens to be the title of a one-act play of mine, adapted from Dickens's 'Christmas Carol,' which Mr. Seymour Hicks has been playing for the *last five years*, and which *he* has made exceedingly *popular*. . . . If there are two *Scrooges* in the field, the public will be liable to confuse the two. . . . May I suggest to you the advisability of advertising your version under another title — there are so many good names available.

"Yours faithfully,

"J. C. BUCKSTONE."

So you see, after playing my *Scrooge* for practically eleven years, I am told some one else has made it *popular*. In addition to this, the majority of the daily papers, most of which had given me splendid reviews each previous

year of my work, then remarked that *I* was following in the footsteps of Mr. Seymour Hicks. I think the public are, however, the judges in this case.

CHAPTER VII

DICKENS CHARACTERS I HAVE PLAYED

It was some three or four months after I had made a success on the music halls as a mimic that my fond idea of presenting characters from Dickens had a chance of being realized. Managers were not keen about it, as I have said, so I went to E. S. Barnes, of the "London," Shoreditch, who had given me my first chance. He hesitated a good deal, and finally said, "Well, I don't know much about Dickens, but, my boy, if you really fancy yourself in it at all, I'll give it a chance. When shall it be?"

I soon fixed a night, and set about the production, and am glad to say I well satisfied him and my audience. My first programme or set of studies was Jingle, Chadband, Carton, Quilp, and the Grandfather. Alfred Jingle, Esq., scarcely caught on. I think the average

music-hall goer at that time was acquainted with R. G. Knowles as a quick "gag-teller," and seemed to miss the point in Jingle's staccato manner, and I therefore gave up trying to make a success of such a monologue; although I feel sure it would be if assisted by another to whom he could talk.

Mr. Chadband was a success at once. Every one seemed to note immediately the oily hypocrite—evidently they had met the gentleman in real life!

For the monologue of Sydney Carton, those who have seen it will remember that I take the dramatic liberty of putting his thoughts into words at the end. I have continued to play this weekly for over twelve years, and it is asked for every week in every town.

Quilp was a great success, but a great strain; for I hopped about like a dwarf with bow legs. I made up Quilp from some of the fine pictures by Charles Green, who, to my mind, is very like Fred Barnard in his contrast in black and white.

The Old Grandfather, from "The Curiosity Shop," was and is, I think, about the most

popular of all my series. I always introduce the "Death of Little Nell," suggesting that the old man is watching her and fancying "she sleeps" and that she will wake again to-morrow. This character has been a great tear extractor from audiences in England, Ireland, Scotland, and America. There have been nights when I have felt my audience in such sympathy with me that I have got over the border line of acting and have actually wept myself, and been unable to attempt another character. The Old Grandfather I made up from Fred Barnard's fine pictures.

The previous reference to Green's illustrations brings to my mind an occasion when I was playing in Nottingham. A man who knew nothing of Dickens said, "I know where you cribbed your old man character from!" "Where?" asked I. "Oh—ah! of course you don't know!" "Well, where?" I repeated, wondering what wonderful discovery this man had made. He said, "You go up to the picture gallery in the Castle and see." I did so, the next day; and there I saw some beautiful studies by Charles

Photo. by] [*Reinhold Thiele.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SYDNEY CARTON.

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS THE OLD GRANDFATHER.

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Green, one of them being the Old Grandfather. Now, if Green had seen my "make-up," or I had seen his picture, it could have been justly said, "how wonderfully well we had copied each other," for there was my make-up exactly, even to the colour of the handkerchief round his neck, and the vacant stare I always contrive to get—and yet I had made up from Barnard's picture and had never seen Green's, and, of course, Green had never seen me.

I am frequently asked whom I use chiefly as my guide in make-up. My plan is always to get hold of the word-picture by Dickens himself first—and what pictures they are! No other author, I think, has even put into cold print such wonderful word-pictures. When I consider I have sufficiently realized what Dickens meant or what he intended to convey, I turn up the different artists' impressions and generally get something from each, and therefore succeed in pleasing the majority. There are, of course, many Dickensians who cannot agree with me because they only want the old exaggerated caricatures that passed muster at the time.

There are characters from whom I have been able to get suggestions of a "walk" or a "pose" or an "expression." As an example, my walk for Bill Sikes—many a one have I seen with that heavy tread, not dissimilar to that of a bull-dog.

Serjeant Buzfuz, one of my studies that is especially appreciated in some towns, is in others a failure. Now, to this character I have added touches and attitudes from several well-known gentlemen in our courts to-day. I always enjoy going into the courts when on tour, and there I see Buzfuz again and again, and it is there I get some splendid inspirations for acting.

I was once the guest of a legal gentleman, and attended the court during the trial of a woman who had kept various lodging-houses and been a receiver of stolen property, some of it being found at each of her houses. This woman sat in the dock, and was a great study to me. I whispered to the counsel, "Look, there is Fagin—only a female one." He watched, and was struck by the same idea. As the woman sat there, the details given by Dickens of Fagin's peculiarities so many years

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SERJEANT BUZFUZ.

Photo. by] [*Reinhold Thiele.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS WILKINS MICAWBER.

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before were all being reproduced. Another instance of Dickens as a great "human" student. She looked into the faces of the jury wondering. She dusted the dock rails, one part of which she polished again and again, and then I caught her counting the gold-painted stars on the ceiling. All these trifling details occupied her, and yet her mind was all fear. Strange to say, with all the evidence against her, all the proofs, the jury (Scotch) found the case "not proven," which, of course, meant that she was *free*.

I shall never forget her own surprise as long as I live. Lucky woman! Lenient jury! Yet one poor wretch who was brought as witness, who had received a *mite* in return for his plunder and was there in the garb of a convict—he had to go and finish his term, while this female "Fagin" was free.

I produced Dick Swiveller at the Tivoli many years ago, but he, too, was a failure. I think the audience wanted the Marchioness to be there to assist. I remember that on that night Edward Terry was present and wrote me a sweet letter about the entertainment, and proposed "Micawber" in place of Swiveller.

Edward Terry was a good Micawber in his day. Micawber has been in my repertoire ever since, and I suppose as successful as anything I have done for twelve years.

Montague Tigg is another light comedy character, which, in some towns, is a great success, and in others a failure. The idea of him borrowing "three half-crowns" to be returned at end of week causes great amusement and receives plenty of applause. Yet there are many towns where he never gets a smile or a hand. As a make-up, it has always been a success. I use the Barnard picture for him.

Seth Pecksniff has been tolerably successful, but not one of my most popular characters. I think this is because he is rather subtle. It is the more broadly marked character that is generally successful.

Bill Sikes I have already mentioned. He is always a success from a "make-up" point of view; but never a great winner of applause.

The Old Grandfather Smallweed for years took my fancy as the medium for a fine old man character sketch, and I wrote and re-wrote it, boiled him down into all sorts of shapes, and

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS MONTAGUE TIGG.

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS BILL SIKES.

[*Facing page* 86.

always worried as to how to do it and introduce him as a monologue. Of course, Smallweed can't walk, in the book; so I decided to turn round from my make-up table in excruciating pain, and at once begin with "Oh, my back! oh, my bones! oh, the brimstone pains," etc. When I had decided on the make-up, I shall never forget the first presentment! How the audience laughed at the wicked old sinner's pains and moans, and growls at his poor old wife. It is claimed by some as one of my best pieces of character acting and make-up. Imagine, after about three years' hesitation as to the best way to present him to the public as a monologue and to suddenly strike the idea, to find it immediately snapped up by imitators, who had perhaps never given the character the slightest thought before. My make-up for Smallweed is from the fine Barnard picture, where he sits in the chair, clutching the air.

Another old villain is Wackford Squeers. I have played him for many years, nearly always with success and plenty of laughter. But he is a character that never brings any applause at the finish. For stage purposes I have always adopted the black patch over

his blind eye, as I think it is more marked to the audience.

A villain of a different mould is Blandois, or Rigaud, in "Little Dorrit," "whose nose went down as his moustache went up." I was anxious for a long time to present him as a contrast to the Sikes and Heep style, more as the polished villain of melodrama. I took for my groundwork the blackmail scene with Mrs. Clennam; and as a character sketch of a villain he has been successful with audiences who have known very little of Dickens.

One character I must write down as a real failure. I produced Mantalini at the Oxford Music Hall. I made a great study of the make-up, for this rascal amused me so much. I went to extra expense and trouble in dressing him, and he was received in cold and silent apathy—or perhaps, let me say, wonder! I gave him one more chance; but no! Either I failed to present him with any conviction, or the public did not like him.

Dan'l Peggotty!—what a character!—"what a dear!" as some of the ladies write to me when speaking of him. He was always

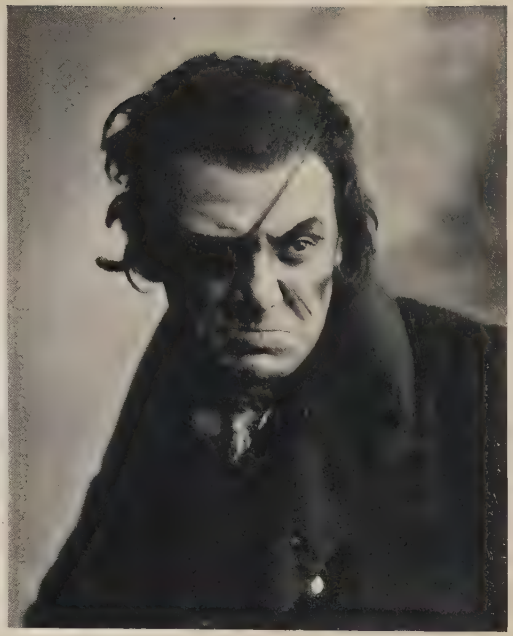

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS WACKFORD SQUEERS.

Photo. by] [*Reinhold Thiele.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS BLANDOIS.

[*Facing page* 88.

a favourite of mine, and I suppose I have shed more tears in presenting him than in all the other characters put together. There are many nights when I have let myself go in this character, and the different effects it has had upon my audiences and myself are many. I have never known Peggotty to fail.

Another poor old favourite of mine is Newman Noggs. Here was another case of great difficulty as to how to present him, and what scene to choose. I decided at last to present him alone in his room, regretting the past, heart-broken at the treatment of Ralph Nickleby, his resolve, when the time came, to be a man, or "a gentleman that he once was"; and so I endeavour to show the poor, drink-sodden man who has made the sudden resolve to "have done with it!"

A clergyman in Cardiff, who came two nights to see me particularly in this character and in Peggotty, paid me the great compliment of saying he would give ten years of his life to preach so great a sermon with the same power.

I was greatly interested in the characters in "Barnaby Rudge," mention of which has been made elsewhere. Maypole Hugh I delighted

in playing, and Sir John Chester and John Willet; but I fear I only pleased a certain few. These characters were not so strongly marked for public presentment—at least, not as monologues. Barnaby Rudge himself was always a most fascinating study, and I think I may say one of my greatest successes as a study. In many ways it is the most difficult character to realize, owing to his youthfulness and hysterical outbursts.

I was very keen on doing "Poor Jo," from "Bleak House," in 1899, at the Tivoli. Of course I knew I was too big, and not a boy; but I was so determined about it that I got a wig made and decided to give it with only my face seen—every light in the building out, and only a small focus lime on my face. I shall never forget that night! I became "Poor Jo" for the time, and yet at the same moment was so full of sympathy for him, that whilst I was acting his death my heart was allowing me to pity him. The effect was that I wept bitterly, and at the side of the stage the staff and several artistes wept too. Dan Leno was so overcome that he could not follow me for two turns. I never repeated this character.

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS MANTALINI.

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS BARNABY RUDGE.

[*Facing page* 90.

Uriah Heep is, I suppose, one of my most popular characters. I studied this very much indeed in order to get a scene where his toadying to Copperfield would be brought out, and where, also, his vindictiveness could be exhibited. My make-up is from a picture of Barnard's. This character has been copied by the many who now do this peculiar sort of entertainment. Some years ago, in a conversation with Fred Villiers, the famous war correspondent, he referred to my entertainment, and casually mentioned the impression my rendering of Heep had made upon him, and told me that one night in Egypt, in his tent, so many miles away, he could see my white face, and hands clasping each other in the impersonation of Heep.

Scrooge has been spoken of at length elsewhere.

I have many favourite characters, but I do not always succeed in making the audiences think the same of them as I do.

It is curious how certain things strike certain minds. I was dining at a well-known Oldham solicitor's house once. The family were visiting the theatre nightly at Blackburn

to see my changes of programme. The servants had all been sent to see me. The cook, entirely ignorant of even the name of Dickens, when asked about me said, "Ooh, ah! he was grand. Ah can't remember all t' characters, boot one was Oliver Cromwell, and he were a bad 'un—eh, but what a face!" She alluded to Bill Sikes, from "Oliver Twist."

On one occasion a call boy, who knew nothing about Dickens, was standing in the wings watching my performance for the first time, and seemed most interested in Fagin and Bill Sikes. He had, of course, many times seen Mr. Fred Karno's Company of comedians in their sketch *Early Birds*. In this pantomimic sketch there is a ruffian like Bill Sikes, and an old Jew like Fagin. All of a sudden the boy quietly exclaimed, "Oh, look, he's pinching Fred Karno's show!"

Once, when playing years ago, at the time my eldest daughter, Winnie, was a little toddler, I had to fall flat on the stage. I think it was as "Mathias," in *The Bells*. Amidst the silence of the audience her little voice was heard, "Daddy's been and hurt his nose!"

Photos. by]

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS URIAH HEEP.

[Reinhold Thiele.

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS FAGIN.

[*Facing page* 92.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME DICKENSIAN STORIES, GRAVE AND GAY

During my career as a Dickensian actor I have had many curious experiences, and many strange incidents have occurred in connection with them.

When I was playing in Cardiff, my name appeared in one line on the bills; then came descriptions of my performance and the characters I was to impersonate, and the last line was occupied, in big type, by the name CHARLES DICKENS. Now, a rough seaman had paid to go in to witness the performance, and evidently was "half-seas over." Coming to the box office afterwards, he wanted to know where—Charley Dickens was. He was informed that Bransby Williams was playing characters from the works of Charles Dickens, but that there was no Charles Dickens on the stage. He insisted that he

had an old pal, a stoker, on board with him, and he thought it d——d funny when he heard "Charley 'ad took to the 'Alls."

In another town I was inundated with letters to make appointments to interview new pupils for my Physical Culture School. This puzzled me very much. Of course I felt there was a mistake somewhere; and ultimately I found out that there was a Charles Dickens, a strong man and athlete, in the town—though what it had to do with me I don't know, unless it were that they thought me his assistant and advance agent, or something similar.

On another occasion, a stage hand quite seriously asked me if Dickens ever came to see me do his works!

Mr. Henry F. Dickens, the eminent K.C., and son of the novelist, is deeply interested in the Westminster Hospital. In 1905 a large bazaar was to be held in aid of its funds, and Mrs. Dickens and her daughters were to have charge of a stall built exactly like "The Old Curiosity Shop" in Lincoln's Inn Fields. In order to help swell the funds, I was invited to give a series of character

sketches from the great man's books, at Mr. H. F. Dickens's house in Brompton. I of course consented, and found that Charles Dickens's grandchildren formed the orchestra.

I remember whilst playing "Blandois," from *Little Dorrit*, I dropped a match which did not go out immediately. I had my back to the audience at the time and did not notice it. Captain Shaw, the once famous fire brigade officer, walked up the room and drew my attention to the fact. He had long retired from the profession which made him famous, but his action showed plainly "once a fireman, always a fireman." However, it caused much laughter to see him come on duty to put out a fire once more.

Here is an incident of another sort. During a pantomime engagement in Liverpool, I recited Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" for charity, and became interested in the great work being done amongst the poor by Mr. Lee Jones in that town. One night I was asked to see a gentleman at the stage door—no name was given. I went to see who it was and what was wanted. I found a gentleman who had been so deeply touched by my

rendering of the "Carol," and the hard, selfish character of Scrooge, and his conversion and benevolence at last, that he wished to testify to his gratitude and appreciation of what he had witnessed, and so asked me to accept a £5 note to use for the good work in which I was helping. He did not wish to disclose his name, but "only desired to add his mite," in memory of the occasion.

During my engagement at the Tivoli, January, 1905, I was playing Dickens characters, making a feature of "Dan'l Peggotty," at the moment when he is afflicted by the news of the flight of Little Em'ly. I shall never forget this particular night I am writing about. I somehow became Dan'l Peggotty to such an extent that I really seemed to feel the loss of Em'ly, and the tears streamed down my cheeks. I well remember the sort of dual personality I presented—I mean that I was not only acting the part, but seemed to be watching the effect on others. A well-known acting manager—who, by the way, is the son of a famous journalist and friend of Dickens—was sitting in the box nearest the stage, with the tears in his eyes; and the

same thing was happening all over the house. Towards the end, at the words, "God guide her footsteps that she may come back," there was a long-drawn sob and a moan, and a woman made her way out of the theatre. The effect was electrical. I got over the borderline of acting, and really wept. Next day I received the following letter, which is still in my possession, and which was, I presume, from the same poor soul who had left the theatre so abruptly. The letter reads—

"London, 13/1/05.

"To Mr. Bransby Williams.

"Sir,

"I have no doubt you never think of yourself as a preacher. I was at the Tivoli on Wednesday evening—since then I have decided to go home to my uncle; he also is a fisherman, and I was brought up by him. I left home, as a lot of others do, but I am going back, and by the time you get this I shall be with him. He is good, and you *must* be good to act the way you do. I shall try now I am going back to him to be a comfort and help to him, and shall always remember

and pray for you, and if the prayers of a fallen one will help you, you should be helped to great things.

"Yours gratefully,

"_____"

After reading that letter and realizing its full meaning, who shall say the stage cannot do some good—aye, and the much abused music-hall stage, too. I was called "The Missionary" in many papers, and one morning's post brought me the following letter and verses:—

"20/1/1905.

"Mr. Bransby Williams.

"Dear Sir,

"The enclosed verses were written because I was so impressed by reading in the *Daily News* about a letter you had received from a young woman who had been affected by your tale of Little Em'ly. Will you accept them as an appreciation of the good done to one 'tired sister,' from

"Yours truly,

"Hettie Nesga."

Photo. by] [*Reinhold Thiele.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS DAN'EL PEGGOTTY.

[*Facing page* 98.

"ANOTHER LITTLE EM'LY."

1.

"God moves mysteriously to perform His wonders as of old,
He needs no hallowed edifice, the message must be told,
In theatre and in music hall, which some folk call accurst,
He'll find a voice to speak for Him, if there's one soul athirst.
For cheering counsel, craving light, along a thorny road,
The Variety stage will do quite well; all ways can lead to God.
A Church may sometimes useful be, but thousands will not go
Where charity is left outside, and virtue freezes so.

2.

"Be proud and thankful, happy man, He used you in your sphere
Of chosen work; He used your voice and gifts to make things clear
To one sad sister's heart, who'd found in pleasure's dazzling hour
Nothing but pain and bitterness, and longed to flee its power.
Go on with your grand work—who knows? how many you may win,
How may homes may gladdened be by stray ones creeping in
With downcast eyes, and faltering step, although at heart so brave.
God grant them valiantly to face the trials they will have.

3.

"The 'Little Em'lys' of the world are made by dreary homes,
Where stern and austere parents crush all mirth ere scarce it comes,
Expecting maidens young and bright, whose pulses throb with joy
Of life to staid and sober be, as pleasures always cloy.

The Church too's altogether wrong with the young it tries to train
By using curb and bit, instead of kindly leading rein.
They must not dance, may hardly sing, except in solemn way,
So youthful lives are stunted, and many go astray.

4.

" One tired sister has grown sick of folly's crooked path,
And freely chosen to go back, and reap the aftermath
Of youthful indiscretion, which is seldom 'clean forgot,'
Or blotted out from memories of those with happier lot.
But we can all united be, in wishing her 'God speed,'
Who bravely turned her face towards home—may she not vainly plead
For kindly welcome, love and care, from those who knew her long
Before she made her first false step, when healthy, young and strong.

5.

" So let theatres and music halls 'increase and multiply,'
To cheer and gladden weary ones, whose lives are made awry
By hard and cruel customs, which grind poor workers down
To barest wages, longest hours, and the dreariest homes in town.
So give them funny jokes and songs, with jollity and mirth,
And make them laugh both long and loud, these tired ones of the earth.
Give 'Little Em'ly' stories, too, to touch some waiting heart.
The work's a vast and mighty one, but all can take a part."

HETTIE NESGA.

20/1/1905.

Many letters reach me from time to time. On one occasion "A Nottingham Lad" wrote—

"DEAR SIR,

"Allow me to thank you for your lifelike representations of Dickens characters on Tuesday evening. They have done me more real moral good than any sermon has ever done: which is the highest praise I can give you. I trust we shall have the pleasure of your company again soon."

Another one from a lad in Sunderland, full of praise from beginning to end; but the part of the letter that interested me most was this—

"The people of Sunderland all want to see you, and my father very much. . . . My father and I went to a meeting in defence of Music Halls the other night, and to our surprise and pleasure a vicar of the church got up and said, 'Such a man as Bransby Williams was a credit to Church or Stage.'"

This is very comforting when one can feel that, apart from earning a good living, the works of a great man like Dickens filter through one's personality, and can do some good.

Then, again, in acknowledging my autograph or post-cards, I get many sweet little letters from children, and these I prize above all others. In Bradford I autographed a little girl's book, and sent her a post-card of Dan'l Peggotty. Among many other things, she wrote—

"I am so glad it is Mr. Peggotty. He was such a dear kind old man. . . . Mother says you are splendid in all your characters, and that if I am a good girl, and read and study the books, she will take me to see you when you come again."

These are just samples of some of the many pleasing notes I have had the honour of receiving.

Now and again I receive letters from those who express surprise that there is such an entertainment on the halls—a sort of "Really,

is it possible! Can any good come out of Nazareth?" Such a letter came from an enthusiastic Dickensian, which ran as follows :—

"30/10/04.

"DEAR SIR,

"I trust you will excuse my taking the liberty of writing to you. I may say at once that I am not begging nor asking for a subscription for the natives of Borrioboola Gha, or anywhere else. Neither am I requesting the favour of your autograph. I wish merely to express to you my deep admiration for your really splendid realizations of the characters of Dickens. None can love him more or be more familiar with his unequalled collection of characters than I am. Therefore you will understand that (as I had never seen you before this week) I was doubtful of your being able to do justice to them. But after seeing your performance, I marvelled greatly at the absolute truth of every detail. You need no patronage from me or any, and I do not write in that spirit. Doubtless you have read Forster's Biography of Dickens, and you will remember how much the artistic perceptions

of the Master were hurt and offended by the clumsy and stupid attempts made by some of the actors of his time to realize his characters. I went to the Empire as a Dickens lover and as an admirer (somewhat critical) of acting; in no sense did I go as caring at all for the usual music hall entertainment. I may admit that I rather dreaded lest you should shock my ideals. After your performance I said, 'If Dickens himself had seen it, he would have been delightfully pleased—for we all know there were none more generous in praise of acting than he, when it was really worthy of praise.'

"Your work is infinitely above the level of the music-hall stage, but by sticking to the halls you must be helping to improve the taste of their patrons. Than your Uriah Heep I have seen nothing better on the regular stage or elsewhere. It is deplorable that a pair of knockabout comedians should be able to draw as much applause as you; but it may be that the audience feel that mere applause is too poor a tribute to your work. I hope it is so. Music-hall audiences like the sentiment piled on, and I was glad that you in no way overdid

the trying speech of Sydney Carton in order to enlist the sympathies of the gallery.

"Don't be discouraged.

"WELL-WISHER."

Another reads—

"Manchester, 15/5/06.

"DEAR SIR,

"I trust you will pardon me writing, but I have for a long time considered the advisability of attempting to express to you the keen enjoyment and pleasure that I have derived from your exquisite recitals. I have seen you on three occasions, and it is not too much to say that you have each time afforded me an intellectual treat. I am no lover of music halls, and have no great opinion of . . . . which, in my opinion, is a place not worthy of you. Oh, the banalities I have sat through whilst awaiting your turn! Than your wonderful impersonations of Dickens characters I wish to see nothing better. I have seen the foremost men of the present stage—I suppose it was the bond of sympathy that must ever exist between true lovers of the 'Master' that

helped to constitute the great attraction you have for me. Apart from your splendid natural gifts of voice and presence, I feel that I can discern in you the sincere and earnest student. No man who was not steeped to the finger tips in the magic atmosphere that emanates from these immortal words could give the living impersonations that you do. To me your turn stands out from the average music-hall programme 'like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear.'

"I trust you will accept this short letter as a simple, unaffected tribute of honest admiration from a sincere if humble

"ADMIRER."

Being a Dickensian, I naturally have a love and reverence for Christmas. I think it is just the family sort of sentimental side of it which appeals, because, when Boxing Day is over, I seem to have a sickening feeling at thoughts of Christmas. It must not be understood that I mean I have gorged or drank too freely. I have played Dickens's "Carol" many Christmas-tides, and I enjoy it and delight in presenting it until the festive season is over, and then—well, I cannot explain what a queer

dislike I have to playing it after Christmas has actually gone by.

Christmas Days are landmarks or milestones in the lives of many of us. One sometimes looks back at some Christmas Days with pleasure, and at some with sadness. I remember jolly Christmas Days when, as a boy, there were no cares at all. Then the more recent Christmases are stamped on my mind. One Christmas in particular, the second of my married life, I had had bad luck, and what little money was due to me never came. My wife and I sat on Christmas Eve—people who knew us little thought we were penniless that night! What a night! We had been promised a little money that was owing, and had relied upon it. We sat and looked at each other, wondering what would happen. It was too late for me to attempt any scheme to get work or money at so late an hour. Many thoughts flashed through my mind. I remembered Harry How, the *Strand Magazine* "interviewer"—how in the old days when we were both amateurs he had, for a joke and for "press copy," recited at the corner of the street; and I was pulling myself together and

wondering if I had the nerve to go through with it alone, and do for dire necessity what he had done for "press copy" and advertisement. Suddenly a postman's knock, and then a double rat-tat almost simultaneously. The postman brought me a five-pound note, and a man came from the well-known stores in the city, bringing a turkey and many additional necessary things—a hamper of goodly proportions. Imagine the change of feeling—so great that we were both choked with emotion. These things had all come from my old governor and his son, "Cheetham," or "Jim," before mentioned in this story. I was at Allan, Cockshuts & Co., the wall-paper manufacturers, and after leaving there and making a struggle as an actor—and having failed so far—it was the kind and sweet thought of my dear friend "Cheetham" who had come to our rescue that Christmas Eve. Many other kindnesses I received from him, and whenever I thanked him he would say, "Oh, that's all right! When you are your own manager some time you can think of paying me back." So I have always a warm corner in my heart for him and his.

Photo. by] [*Campbell-Gray, Ltd.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SCROOGE.

[*Facing page* 108.

Another Christmas—a black one, although by this time I had become successful, and was starring in pantomime in Glasgow. In that town the theatre is open on Christmas Day, and matinée and evening shows are played. My little boy had been operated upon, and was just pulling through, and an uncle lay dead at home in London. There was I playing in Glasgow whilst this uncle lay dead at my house in town, and my wife grief-stricken there, while at my house at Selsey Bill my boy was struggling towards recovery. We were all split up that year, and no mistake.

The following Christmas I came back from America to find everything splendid—family healthy and happy. I thought I must celebrate our good fortune in some way, so decided, as I was playing Scrooge at the London Hippodrome, to take the spirit of Christmas to some of the poor Tiny Tims in the hospitals. I dressed myself and made up my dresser as Father Christmas, and then with two large motor-cars we went through London laden with toys. We visited the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, the one

in which Dickens had been so interested, and there Father Christmas walked into each ward with a sack of bonbons, besides a toy for each child as a Christmas present. Next day I went to the North London Children's Hospital in Hackney Road, where I went through the same process. At this hospital some of the more convalescent children were gathered in one ward, and stood round singing carols. There was something so touching in the sight and the sound that I felt positively "weepy." Next day came the Kennington Hospital in Kennington Road. There the same performance; but in one ward was a boy who would accept nothing. No toy pleased him, so I set myself to amuse him, and there I clowned and played to him, and unconsciously was grimacing and stepping back to survey him in the manner of Dan Leno, when my eyes lighted on the tablet at the back of his cot, and I dropped the toy from my hand as I read the words, "The Dan Leno Cot." Then I thought of Dan, and the benefits we all worked at to supply this cot, and there was I clowning in a good cause before the very cot dedicated to his memory.

An incident in one of my very early appearances in the provinces in a music hall often amuses me when I think of it. It was a very small hall, and fairly rough—quite unsuited to my style of entertainment, and not at all the place I had expected to find. The manager, however, was keen on trying me, and so paid me to appear. Before I was due on I looked through the curtain, and fairly trembled! I never dreamed the audience would listen. When my turn did arrive the manager, in tall hat, frock coat, and button-hole all complete, appeared in the stalls—or rather *pit*, for it was *all* pit—and addressed the occupants. He told them all about me, and asked them to give me a fair hearing, and threatened to *cane* any boys that were naughty! With that he actually brought forth a cane, and with it tapped the conductor of the orchestra on the shoulder to begin my music. I entered, and received a great reception. The manager then called "Silence!" and while I made up he walked up and down the aisle with his cane. I played my full show, and it went splendidly; but all the time the manager kept up and down, and if a lad laughed in the

wrong place, glared at him, often called him by his Christian name, or, if he was near enough, just tapped him and called him a naughty boy! At the end of the show he made a speech and congratulated me, and told the audience "he knew 'em," he knew they were "class," and it didn't matter to them if it was Dickens or Shakespeare, so long as it was good.

I was once playing at the Tivoli, Oxford, Metropolitan, and Paragon in Mile End Road. I was doing Dickens characters at the Tivoli, Imitations at the Oxford, Clement Scott's *Heroes of the Victoria Cross* at the Metropolitan, and *Scrooge* at the Paragon. After leaving the Metropolitan my horse fell and broke the shafts of the brougham. The usual crowd in the street gathered, and seeing the grease paint and make-up on the occupant of the cab, made the usual remarks: "Hullo, Bill—here! Here's a *pro.!*" "Hullo! where are they going to burn yer!" "Hurry up, mate, you'll never get there!" Then came along the old cabby: "Hullo, governor, want a lift?" To this I replied I did, and if he could hurry and do the journey in quick time he would be paid well. I bundled in, with my bag and my electric

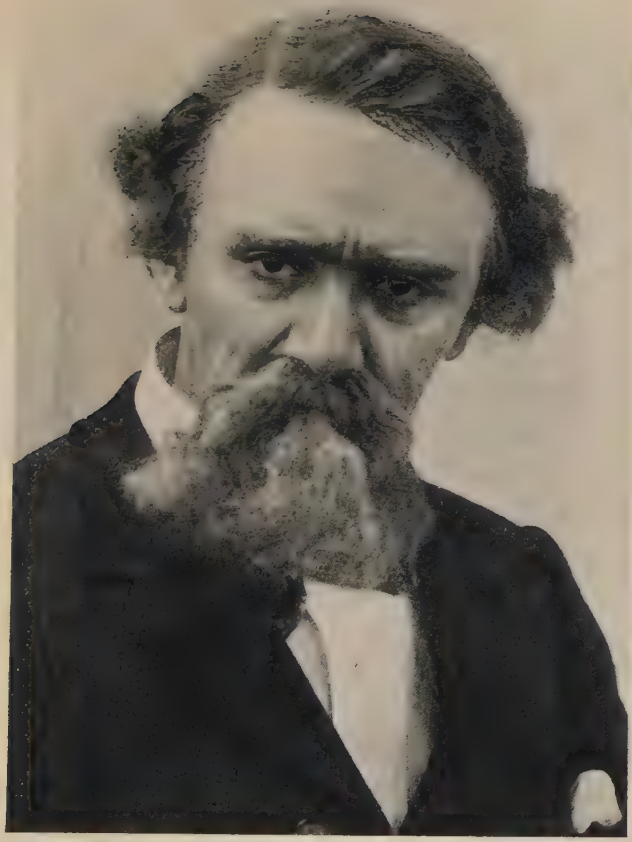

Photo. by] [*R. Vining.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS CHARLES DICKENS.

[*Facing page* 112.

lamp, and as soon as we started I changed and made up for Scrooge. On arriving at the Paragon the cabby nearly fell down at seeing an old wizened man getting out, and no one else inside. "My God!" he said, "what's come of the young 'un?"

The following story is a mere coincidence. At the time the South African War was drawing to an end, and troops were arriving home, I was playing in Swansea, and my name was looming very large on the walls advertising the "Empire" programme. That same week there was a big set-out and welcome home to Lieut. Bransby Williams, and on the Sunday the Rev. Bransby Williams preached at one of the places of worship, so that during the week the Bransby Williams Trio appeared.

For some years I used to finish my entertainment by making up as Charles Dickens. But I found the idea did not please every one, and so gave it up. Later, when Oswald Stoll was presenting the famous picture by Sir Luke Fildes, R.A., of "The Empty Chair," I made up again as Dickens and occupied the chair, but as soon as the curtain rose I vacated it, to intensify the effect of the picture.

CHAPTER IX

SHAKESPEAREAN AND OTHER PERFORMANCES

A SHORT record of the various other performances I have given during my music-hall career may perhaps interest. As I have stated elsewhere, I commenced with an evening-dress performance of imitations of popular actors. Then came the impersonation of Dickens characters. My next effort was my own dramatization in monologue of "A Christmas Carol," under the title of *Scrooge*.

I then ventured on a version in sketch form of "A Tale of Two Cities," which I called *A Noble Deed*. This was produced at the Oxford, I taking the part of Sydney Carton, introducing Darnay, Lorry, Lucie Manette, old Dr. Manette, and Jerry Cruncher —a character, by the way, omitted in *The Only Way*, produced some years after. The scene took place in the wine shop of Defarge. It

was a big and expensive production, but did not run long. I think it was too near a "stage" production to please the theatre managers, who were then commencing the campaign against music-hall sketches.

After this I produced a version of the story in "The Pickwick Papers" entitled "The Goblin who stole the Sexton" at Collins Music Hall as a Christmas production. This was written by Cayley Calvert, and as the Goblin I had the assistance of a very capable actor, J. J. Bartlett. Following this, I was engaged by the late George Adney Payne to give at several halls *Heroes of the Victoria Cross*, written by Clement Scott. As I recited each story, it was illustrated by a huge living picture. The series was enormously successful. I was not the creator in this case, as the idea was originally produced at the Alhambra with that fine all-round actor, Sydney Valentine, as the reciter.

I then revived my Imitations, using, at the suggestion of J. L. Toole, "Hamlet" as a setting.

Next came my dramatic sketch, *87, or The Veteran's Birthday*, the story and origin

of which is dealt with in the chapter on John L. Toole. In this I was originally assisted by Frank Motley Wood (a fine old character actor) as Tom; but when touring the big towns with it, Fred Morland took the part—a capable actor and well known to-day through his great interest in the Actors' Association.

Then I produced Robert Buchanan's dramatic poem, *Fra Giacomo*, at the Tivoli, as a one-act tragedy, introducing the other characters and scenery. This caused a little stir, for it had never before been thought possible to produce such a tragedy on a music-hall stage. It was one of the best staged productions the music halls have seen—thanks to the enterprising manager.

I then turned my attention to the characters of one novel—that of "Barnaby Rudge"—and for this I had a scene built, an exact model of the "Chester Room" of the "King's Head," Chigwell, and the famous chairs from the room were lent for the production. I played Sir John Chester, Maypole Hugh, John Willet, Solomon Daisy, and Barnaby Rudge.

At this time Fred Bowyer, the author of so many pantomimes—also of *The Stowaway*,

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

SCENE IN "FRA GIACOMO."

[*Facing page* 116.

made so popular by the late Jenny Hill—wrote a dramatic monologue entitled *The Sleigh Bells*. This was a version of the famous play *The Bells*, in one act. I was engaged as the Burgomaster, Mathias, and was the only character speaking. The rest were all played in dumb show.

My next was a dramatization of "Fagin," from "Oliver Twist," in monologue form, at the Oxford. This had a long run, and a great reception, but the strain was too great for me. I played for twenty-five minutes, very heavy work all the time, finishing with an awful fight with the Bow Street runners, and the arrest of the Jew. At the same time I played a monologue of Sydney Carton, at the Tivoli—telling the sad story of Carton and his sacrifice, which occupied twenty minutes.

Wondering what to tackle next, came the suggestion that I should do "Uncle Tom's Cabin," owing to some one saying Dickens was well known, but that Harriet Beecher Stowe's book was about the best known book in the whole world. I played St. Clair, Phineas Fletcher, Simon Legree, Topsy, and Uncle Tom—all as quick changes. I did this for

Mr. Oswald Stoll, who provided the scenery for it.

Then came my first engagement at the Empire, Leicester Square. There I produced a beautifully written one-act monologue entitled *The Last of his Race*, by Miss Beatrix M. De Burgh, with a fine dramatic ending. This was charmingly staged, but the audience was apparently quite unused to such dramatic trifles. But I still hope to reproduce it elsewhere.

Miss Beatrix M. De Burgh is a talented actress, and played recently with George Alexander in *The Prisoner of Zenda*. We hear a great deal of the great unacted nowadays, and the want of good plays. I may be wrong, but I think some day Miss De Burgh will become famous as a playwright. Some one will suddenly find her work to be good and produce it—I personally wish I was free at the moment to use a play of hers.

My next engagement at the Empire was in a piece called *Mephy*. I was made up as the Devil, and in a light, bantering burlesque played "Mephy" in the manner and voice of popular actors and comedians.

AS TOPSY.

AS SIMON LEGREE.

Photos. by]
AS PHINEAS FLETCHER.

[*Hana.*
AS UNCLE TOM.

BRANSBY WILLIAMS IN "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN."

[*Facing page* 118.

I also produced at the London Pavilion a monologue called *The Vicar's Daughter*, a sweet little story, beautifully mounted, the scenery by Helmsley. It was suggested by "The Vicar of Wakefield." The scene opened with the old Vicar listening to the boys singing the carols. Then he soliloquized, and told the story of the flight of his daughter with the Squire—his weary search in London, and return alone, how he mourns this first Christmas she has been away since her birth, and sits alone by the fire with his family Bible, and dozes off to sleep. A voice is then heard singing the old carol. The old man starts, thinks it is a dream, as the door opens and the lost sheep returns, kneeling at his feet. Reconciliation, as church bells ring in Christmas.

My last effort was to present Shakespeare in the same manner as Dickens, and the experiment has proved a success in every big town in the country. I have already given *Hamlet*, *Shylock*, *Henry V.*, *Wolsey*, and *Othello*. There were difficulties to surmount in regard to adapting Shakespeare to my purpose. In the course of preparing Dickens for the stage as monologue characters, I could draw on the

whole book; take the characteristics of deportment, the varying phases of pathos or villainy or humour, and graft them on to my outline or "stem," and thus get a miniature picture. But in the case of Shakespeare I had to use *lines* and *words* accurately. But I resolved still to do as I did with Dickens, viz. to select an incident or scene and graft the lines from all over the play until I got, as it were, a dramatic scene as complete as possible, and one which would be perfectly clear to and understood by all sections of the audience, from the gallery boy who perhaps did not know, and the stallite who would be interested in the development. In *Henry V.* we have the set declamatory and patriotic speech to hand, viz. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," etc. But with *Hamlet* it is not so. I decided, therefore, to select the meeting with the Ghost, which has its intense moments, and which I felt would suit my particular style, and attempt to make the audience see that I am with Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, and that I see the Ghost, and follow same off. In doing this, I commence as though in thought: "My father's spirit in arms—all is not well,

Photos. by]

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS CARDINAL WOLSEY.

[*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS HAMLET.

[*Facing page* 120.

Horatio. If it assume my father's noble person, I'll speak to it—though hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace." I speak these lines crossing the stage in deep thought, and suddenly stop, stricken at the sight of the Ghost, and then exclaim, "Angels and ministers of Grace defend us," etc., etc. At the end of this speech I break up the rest of the scene to make my monologue a complete dramatic scene thus: "It waves me still—Hold off your hands—By Heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me—Go on, I'll follow thee." I then exit as if after the Ghost, and thus complete the scene.

In *Shylock* I enter with the words, "There in Antonio I have another bad match," etc., and go through that speech to make it a complete sketch, and to get an exit I use sentences from other scenes. Thus, at the end of the above speech I speak, "And I tell thee—that if every ducat in six thousand ducats were in six parts and each part a ducat—I would have my bond—Antonio called me dog, before he had a cause—Well, as I am a dog, let him beware my fangs—I'll hear no more speaking—I'll have my bond—my bond, I swear!" At

this I make my exit, storming—so that I have used parts of other scenes to make a complete scene for presentation solus.

Othello was the most difficult of the series, because had I taken one set speech I could not have appealed to the man who does not know his Shakespeare. So I set to work to make a scene. I took my text, "Desdemona false to me." Then I started his doubt—reverted to his love—then suspicion, and back again to love, followed by the poison in Iago taking effect. His belief that she is false—then the brain storm and passion—making my exit on his decision to kill her, shrieking, "Blood, blood, blood!" I have found it is an art in itself to dish up these kind of things. It is most interesting at all times, and a labour of love.

At different times I have introduced monologue poems—by various authors—the most popular all over the country having been *Devil-May-Care* and *An Old Man and 'is Pipe*. Both these poems were written for me by the late Charles H. Taylor, who first became popular as a lyric writer in Manchester, and gradually became well known all over the country. He wrote the lyrics of the pantomime

Photos. by]

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS SHYLOCK.

[*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS AS HENRY V.

[*Facing page* 122.

Aladdin in which I played last Christmas. But he was better known by his last success, viz. *Tom Jones*. He awoke one morning to fame, being heralded unanimously by the press. But, alas! he died a young man, a brilliant career nipped in the bud. The music of these poems is the work of that clever composer and conductor at the Empire, Leicester Square, Cuthbert Clarke.

I had a memorable season at the London Pavilion in 1898, memorable on account of the real hard work it entailed. I commenced it by giving character impersonations from Dickens, but it was suggested by some one that I might do characters from other books. In order to come to a decision as to which these should be, it was proposed that an election or ballot should take place amongst the audience, and that I should play the character which headed the poll each week on the following Monday. The following voting paper was distributed among the audience at each performance from Monday to Thursday, and the result of the poll was declared from the stage on the Monday, just prior to my entrance to impersonate the character :—

THE LONDON PAVILION, Piccadilly Circus, W.

Manager - - Mr. FRANK GLENISTER.

BRANSBY WILLIAMS'S CHARACTER ELECTION.

VOTING CARD. .....*1898.*

CHARACTER.	NOVEL.	AUTHOR.	VOTE.
Reuben Dale	*The Mighty Atom*	*Corelli*	X
Sherlock Holmes	*Sherlock Holmes*	*Doyle*	X
Pete	*The Manxman*	*Caine*	X

Signature.....

PLUMP FOR ONE OR THREE CHARACTERS.

Vote thus X in the last column. The three Votes may go to one character. When filled up, kindly hand this Card to one of the Attendants, place in box, or leave on seat for collection.

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Between the Thursday and the Monday nights I had to dramatize the character as a monologue (which meant, of course, a re-perusal of the book), make a sketch of the wig and get it made by Gustave, of Long Acre —that most wonderful perruquier who has executed all my make-ups for the last fifteen years—and choose my costume, which often meant rushing about from place to place. This went on for eight weeks, and the task was too much for me.

I made it known that as I was always doing Dickens characters I would prefer that they should leave that writer out of their voting; but it had little effect, as one of his creations was invariably in the list.

The first week's voting brought "Reuben Dale," from "The Mighty Atom," by Marie Corelli, at the top. This was a most difficult task for me, for I had never read the book. However, I managed fairly well, and made a daring speech on religion.

"Sherlock Holmes" was a great success, as I gave three changes in the one character; and this, be it noted, was some time before it had ever been played, so that I think I was the first stage Sherlock Holmes.

The third character chosen was "Pete," from Hall Caine's "The Manxman."

Each week onward brought shoals of votes for all kinds of characters from various authors. During the run of this series I can remember giving Triplet ("Peg Woffington"), Marcus Superbus ("Sign of the Cross"), Mickey Free ("Charles O'Malley"), Svengali ("Trilby"), Fagin ("Oliver Twist"), Jingle ("Pickwick"),

Prince Lucio ("Sorrows of Satan"), and Coupeau ("L'Assommoir").

The strain was so great I could not keep it going, and had to abandon the scheme. The experiment certainly gave me an idea of the varied tastes of my audience.

CHAPTER X

FIRST VISIT TO AMERICA

I WAS always advised by my American friends to visit America, because America simply worshipped Dickens. Being a "home-bird," I was continually putting off even considering it; but at last I decided I must go and try my luck there. Dickens himself had been there before I was born, and I read and re-read the accounts of his tours and reports of his speeches, and wondered if I were worthy, or if I could make the Americans think my representations of his characters—that are simply idolized by them—realistic enough, or should I disturb their ideals of these same characters? Some encouraged me by saying that I could not fail; but others said, "Well, it's a chance—remember Dan Leno was not a great success, and so-and-so did very badly"—and so on. Then I thought to myself, Dickens characters seem to succeed

in all towns in England, and before all audiences. Why? Simply because of his humanity. Now, thought I, every audience has a heart, and in America plays of what they call "heart interest" succeed. Yes! Why not? I don't think I can fail with such as Dan'l Peggotty and the old "Grandfather"! These were my thoughts, and so I decided to go.

I had a splendid send-off from Liverpool from a crowd of professional and other friends. What hand-shakes! There was a sadness, as there always is about leave-taking; and although I smiled, my heart ached at the parting from my own dear ones.

"Any more for the shore?" was being cried, and friends were all leaving and crossing the gangway. Soon the gangways were drawn up, and the sight of the landing-stage filled with friends of the passengers was a sight to see. I was proud that some of them were my friends. Each of us had our little group, and mine sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow," "Auld Lang Syne," and "Will ye no' come back again," etc., etc., and cheered and cheered until the fading cries of "Good

luck!" died away, and we were then on our way. I found all sorts of floral tributes in my cabin, and shoals of wires from friends, and many from unknown admirers. It was a very comfortable trip, for the crew of the *Caronia* were of the best.

The time soon slipped away. The weather was as cold as it had been hot on land, and it seemed strange, in twenty-four hours, to see all summer wear put away, and fur coats brought out. There were the usual concerts on board, and those who were good sailors made merry the whole time. Two days of that trip I was a very bad sailor and lay in my cabin with the usual miserable feelings. On the programme of the concert in the first-class saloon I was down to appear. Shall I ever forget the ship's pitching and tossing and the doctor's coming to see if I could manage to do something to entertain? Oh! what a horrible idea! Go and stand up and look "green," and feel—oh, feel—well, some things are better left unsaid. I was sorry, of course. Next day I was better—so was the weather. At last came the cry of "Sandy Hook!" when all the Americans—and nearly all the first and

second-class passengers were Americans—felt they were on the "last lap" for Home. We were to be at our journey's end that night, but could not land, it being too late for the American doctors and Customs officers to come aboard; so the doctor of the ship and some of the passengers suggested that I might help them to pass the last evening away, as the ship would be at anchor in the bay. I consented to appear and do a "turn" in the concert.

That evening I had my first sight of Coney Island illuminated. What a sight! I have never seen anything like it. The whole length of the shore of the island illuminated, and every building outlined in all the colours of the rainbow. It was most impressive, and to the Americans it was not only beautiful to look at, but it was "Home." It was then that a most touching and impressive thing happened. A huge crowd lined the decks, and some one started to sing "Land of our Fathers." This was impressive enough; but when a woman's voice started, and the whole crowd joined in, "Nearer, my God, to Thee!" I thought then how I should feel when I saw dear old England again. It was, of course,

all most interesting, but it was not home for me—my home was far away. The time arrived for the concert. I was in my cabin and thought, "Well, I don't go in yet, or, rather, when is it near my turn on the programme?" My steward came to the cabin door and said, "They are waiting for you, sir." "What, already?" "Yes, all seated." I then found that instead of being a part of a programme, *I* was the programme. I called the doctor who was in charge of the show, and told him I only had intended to do a recitation. "Oh," said he, "we understood a Recital." I walked into the saloon, and was accorded an enormous reception. "Poor fellow, he was bad yesterday," was a remark I heard. Well, there was nothing for it but to tell them I was not quite prepared, but would do my best. I commenced by giving an American poem, "Jim Bludso," by Col. John Hay. I thought it would be daring, before what I felt was my first American audience, and so apologized for the dialect. At the conclusion of this first item, the Hon. Chas. Hughes, the present Governor of the State of New York, shook hands and said there

was no excuse needed—that it was "bully!" I soon got wound up, and eventually I had given one hour and a half, alone, and every one was satisfied. There was a fine collection for the Merchant Seamen's Home and Orphanage. This concert made me many friends, and some are my regular correspondents to-day. Then came the usual walk round the deck. I was smoking, when a number of small boats came out from shore and got alongside. I found they contained pressmen, who were after Charles Hughes to interview him and get his views on England, and to learn if he was going to stand for elections. Next morning the papers were all "Charles Hughes and the Coming Election." After the landing and the going through the Customs, came the "At last we are here!"

Not until I was in my hotel and alone had I felt the sense of utter loneliness. How awful it must feel to any one who has left dear ones behind, and is short of money, and come only to find a chance! How strange it all seemed—the rush of the street cars, and no "keep to your left," but all "keep to the right," and the reverse in getting on and

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

A FAMILY GROUP.

[*Facing page* 132.

off cars! All this wanted some getting used to.

How simple travelling is in New York! Cars along all the Avenues and then across the numbered streets. You can get anywhere and everywhere in a third of the time we do, and for so much less expense. You get a transfer from one car to another, and pay no more for it. Then the "Underground," or what we call the Tube—they call it "Subway." You go from one end of New York to the other for five cents. And what a service! —there are locals to stop at every station, and expresses for long distances. No time is wasted, and when the train comes in all the men call "Step lively!" and you either do so, or you get *left*. Then above the road is the overhead railway, the ugliest, noisiest, and most dangerous thing I know. A terrible accident happened while I was there, and consequently I used it as little as possible. Only once did I use a cab. They told me that only millionaires or fools used cabs. I found out *why*—the charges would make your hair curl!

There is no doubt that travelling in New York is simple, quick, and cheap. I was

of course greatly interested in the "Sky-scrapers"—my word, they are high! A press gentleman who interviewed me told me he would be pleased if I would go and see him in his office. I said I should be very pleased —where? "Oh," said he, pointing to the *Times* building, "my room is on the twenty-fifth floor." I paid him this visit, and my first experience of a lift—or, as they call it, elevator—was queer—up! up! up!

There he sat, writing away, and looking across the city, or rather down at the city. I felt quite giddy. I was then taken to the top of the building, I think about three more floors up, and out at a door to the roof, and oh! what a sight! It was the City of New York down so far below looking like a toy. I felt far from comfortable at such a height. The elevators in these buildings are wonderful, too—even on these they save time. You go to a very high building, where all floors are offices, etc. Well, you may want the fifth floor, and another man wants the twenty-fifth. Instead of one elevator, there are four. One goes up to every floor, this is called the "local." The next one goes up, stopping at

every fifth floor, the next every tenth, and the other is the "express," with perhaps only one stop up and one stop down.

Then the hotels are interesting too. I was staying at the Astor, one of the finest hotels in New York. In each bedroom there is a beautiful bath-room, etc., hot and cold water at any hour of day or night, electric lights for reading in bed, table lights, and everything can be regulated to your requirements, such as fine light, half-light, or a glimmer for the night-light, should you require it. Then there is a telephone in each room for use to any part of the hotel, or even city or country. Downstairs is your little cupboard for your keys and your letters. When a letter arrives, it is put in your little locker, and the fact is immediately communicated to you in your room by a light showing over the telephone which says, "Letters await you in office." In these ways of comfort, bath-rooms, and accommodation, America is far ahead of us.

Another place that interested me very much was Central Park, a fine large and natural one. One thing which strikes a

stranger immediately is the number of squirrels running about quite tame, like the pigeons at St. Paul's Cathedral. You feed them with nuts. They come to you the moment they know you have some for them. After they have had one or two from your open hand, you can open your pocket and they will come and help themselves out of them. When they have had enough, or understand that there are plenty more, they take each nut and dig a hole and bury it for food for the winter. You see a great deal of this squirrel feeding in Boston. There I saw a man sitting on a seat with squirrels at his pockets, pigeons on his shoulders, and hundreds of sparrows at his feet—all as tame as possible, with no fear whatever.

To describe all my experiences in America would, I think, make a volume in itself, so let us now get to the business for which I went to America.

I appeared at Fifty-eighth Street—not the best place for me to open at, by any means—and the weather was intensely hot. Yet, despite all this, and my nervousness, I made a big success. My first night will ever be

remembered by me. The crew of the boat, the *Caronia*, had all booked seats, and when I appeared, sent up such an English cheer that I was at a loss how to commence, whilst at the end of my show many of them threw English roses at me, and nearly brought tears to my eyes by their good feeling and kind thoughts. In a very few days I was proud to have become an established favourite on Broadway. I had a very good time at "Hammerstein's," kept by the famous Oscar Hammerstein, who first took Dan Leno there, and who now runs the greatest opera shows in the world. I played various characters at each show, and finished with "Fagin," the Jew in the condemned cell. This, twice a day, was a terrible strain on me, and I felt it very much indeed. The audiences were so appreciative and attentive, that they drew the best work out of me, and it was only afterwards that I felt the strain. I often think if audiences only knew that it really lies with themselves as to the kind of show they get, how much better it would be for the actors. When they are listless and chatty, the actor feels he cannot move them, and so often gives a performance that

is merely automatic. But when they are attentive, and take up "points," then each point, or each laugh, or, if it is serious and dramatic, each situation they realize and applaud, so are they urging the actor on and on to great effects. Then, and then only, does the actor feel and act with all his soul, simply because he and his audience are in sympathy. What a great thing it is! I have found myself weeping real tears in the "Grandfather," at the death of Little Nell; but those have only been times when I have "*got*" my audience, and they feel with me and for me. Yet there are times when a man will, under your very nose, coolly read a newspaper. I cannot think what to say about these gentlemen—it is cruel in the extreme, when an artist is on the stage, to sit and read on as though they were in a reading-room, and perfectly oblivious of the fact that they have come in to be entertained. I have seen several female artistes sometimes come off and cry. There are theatres in America where, if a man reads, he is handed the address of the nearest reading-room and library. There is no smoking in the American Vaudeville Theatre, and ladies and gentlemen

remove their hats. A man would never dare sit down with his hat on. What a difference the non-smoking makes to the actor and actress!

Another excellent thing is that no payment is demanded for programmes. In the place of programmes, a small, well-printed miniature magazine is given to each person, free, with plenty of interesting matter to read for both men and women.

My first visit to America was a great success—so much so, that managers were a little annoyed because I could not stay longer. I was due back to play in pantomime, and could not get released. I met so many nice people that I was loath to leave, save that I had nearer dear ones awaiting me at home.

The Manhattan Branch of the Dickens Fellowship gave me a "Farewell" dinner, and turned up in goodly numbers. Cary Eggleston, the author of "The Juggernaut," occupied the chair. The Hon. Hermann Metz, the comptroller of the City of New York—a sort of Treasurer or Chancellor of the Exchequer—attended the dinner, and brought several volumes of a famous edition of Dickens

to show me. I think there were twenty volumes, and each volume was worth one thousand dollars—that is equivalent to £200 each volume. Of course I took good care to make use of the opportunity, and had a good look. They were very wonderful — such volumes at such a price are beyond the reach of any of us unless of unlimited means. It was a pleasant last night, and made a suitable finish to a most enjoyable trip, artistically and financially.

Next day I set sail from New York again, on board the same boat, s.s. *Caronia*. I had a hearty welcome from officers and crew, and a most enjoyable trip.

Unfortunately, we were destined to have a little excitement on the last night. It was the day before Queenstown was reached. At night there was a concert on board. I, among other things, recited "Jim Bludso," the story of an American captain on the Mississippi, who held the wheel of an old boat while it burned, and the passengers all got off "before the smoke-stacks fell, and Bludso's ghost went up alone in the smoke of the *Prairie Bell*." In the very early hours of the morning, we were

all aroused and shifted from our cabins to the dining-saloon, and found the crew battling with an outbreak of fire. It appeared that a fire had broken out down below, and all on my deck were cleared out for safety. It was most exciting for the time. Most of the women were terrified; but the one great and reassuring thing was, we were only a few hours from Queenstown. One incident I remember. A mother went back to her cabin and told her little boy to sit quite still until she came back. "I guess I will, Momma," he said; "but don't forget my post-cards, as I don't want them burned. I guess we'll be all right at Queenstown, if the boat ain't." There was an old couple much disturbed; the old lady was in an awful state, and moaned fearfully. The old gentleman was as bad, but blustered a great deal. Poor old chap, in his hurry he had forgotten to put in his false teeth, and therefore appeared frightfully old and as toothless as my "Old Showman," whom I present among my character studies. He clutched my arm, and spluttered, "Ith there any danger—any immediate danger?" I, trying to be funny, said, "No, Dad, the ship will not go down for quite

five minutes." He only half smiled, but I think at the moment thought me a most unfeeling ruffian.

The crew worked unceasingly, and at last we were assured that all danger was over, and at Queenstown all was well again. Yet several people would not proceed any further, and left the ship. Another incident was pitiful, yet very funny. A poor-looking, frightened-to-death fellow left the boat in his pyjamas with two lifebelts and a violin. What an object he looked, and oh, how we all laughed!

We were all glad once more to land home safely, after what might have been a terrible disaster. The wonder was it was not made much of in the newspapers; but scarcely anything ever leaked out.

CHAPTER XI

SECOND VISIT TO AMERICA

I WAS re-engaged to return to America the following autumn, 1907, and set sail this time on the famous ship *Lusitania* on her second trip. The passenger-list was a remarkable one, including celebrities of many nations and many interested in the ship itself—or, perhaps, rather in its boasted powers. It was a most notable trip, inasmuch as it was a record one, winning the "blue ribbon" of the ocean. What excitement there was to know the "run" each day, and on the Thursday night excitement was at its height. We passed Sandy Hook in record time, and were all soon made aware of it. There were speeches at dinner, congratulations and cheers for the captain, and last, to finish up the night with, a concert was given in the beautiful drawing-room. At this concert Mark Hambourg, the

famous pianist, gave us a great treat. I appeared and gave some imitations, and, as an encore, and to please the Americans, I added an impression of David Warfield, that fine American actor, in his great performance in *The Music Master*. It was a great night.

Speeches were made by representatives of several nations. One was by an English M.P., who remarked, "We have congratulated the Cunard Company, we have praised 'our flag' on having once more secured supremacy; but do not let us forget the arduous task of the men below working in that terrible heat, firing the furnaces to keep up speed—the stokers."

This speech impressed me with the idea of a joke that was afterwards recorded in almost every paper in England and America. I said to myself, "Now, here's a chance of some fun!" I found my cabin steward and enlisted his services. He secured me, in a very few minutes, the dirty, greasy, coal-dusty raiment of a stoker and an old overall of an engineer. I shall never forget the dirt and my poor dress clothes. The cap weighed heavily with oil and coal dust—this I rubbed

Photo. by] [*A. E. Peacock.*

OFF TO AMERICA (EUSTON).

MR. AND MRS. BRANSBY WILLIAMS AND DAUGHTER AND MR. S. F. EDGE.

[*Facing page* 144.

all over my face, and then pressed it down on my head; and thus, armed with a short pipe, made my appearance in the drawing-room among the ladies and gentlemen. No one recognized me, but all accepted the idea that a genuine stoker was among them. I received a terrific welcome, and at once acted the part, and addressed the chairman in husky tones, as an Irishman. I said, "I had been sent up by my mates to thank them for all their kind words. But what we had done was only our duty." I added that it was "dry" duty, too. This last remark was so suggestive of a "drink," and the passengers all so good-humoured, that at once they collected $125, and presented it to me for my "mates" to have a drink with that night. Again I was cheered, and I was laughing to myself when the purser was informed a stoker had dared to come up from below. He at once despatched a couple of burly officers to teach the "stoker" a lesson.

They most unceremoniously caught hold of me and gave me a running flight down-stairs, and I could only save my neck by telling them who I was. They let go, and sat

down on the stairs to laugh while I got my breath—for they had almost choked me. Then the joke got about the ship, and every one enjoyed it.

I was greatly surprised, on landing, to find it announced in big headlines in the New York papers that Bransby Williams, the Dickens actor, had fooled the Cunard officials. I have told just the simple outline of this "Stoker joke," because it has since assumed so many forms in various papers and reports. Needless to say, the $125 went to the real stokers, who appreciated the joke more than anybody.

The arrival of the great ship in New York harbour was a wonderful experience. Every big ship and little steamer, even small launches, all welcomed us with their screeching syrens. The last stage of the journey up the river to the dock was to us on board a remarkable sight. The shores and docks and house-tops were a mass of swarming humanity. We could hear the cheers from all sides—cheers of welcome. All nationalities were forgotten—it was just a hearty congratulation from all on a record feat.

This second visit of mine to America was even more successful than the first. I met old friends and made many new ones. I received a hearty welcome from all, and the Manhattan Branch of the Dickens Fellowship again gave a welcome banquet, when I met many new and distinguished friends.

I opened in Brooklyn this time, and saw great alterations in a year. They were just completing the tunnel under the river to connect New York and Brooklyn. I had heard of how the Americans had a way of moving entire buildings, and had smiled as many of us have done and thought it a tall story! But here in Brooklyn I used to go every day and watch the progress of the moving of the Montano Theatre from one street to the corner of another—and seeing is believing. It was simply wonderful to see a great building being moved slowly and surely on thousands of rollers, as I did. It was marvellous! But there are many other wonders. Brooklyn Bridge itself, I think, is one of the wonders of the world. It is so high that great ships can pass up and down the river, and it looks wonderfully weird, high up in the sky, when

seen from below; while the ships below, when seen from above, look quite small.

During the week's engagement at Brooklyn, an incident occurred at a matinée, very slight in itself, but giving an idea of the sensationalism of some of the journals. I will just tell the incident as it occurred, and the manner in which it was reported afterwards. During a turn, a woman screamed, and several of her sex in the front rows started up; one of them attempted to get on the stage, fearing fire, and was, I suppose, thinking the stage the best and surest way of escape. It appeared that a man had been suspicious of his wife, and had secured a seat in the dress circle to spy upon her. He singled her out in the stalls with another man, and had left his seat and gone downstairs and simply stood beside his ladylove and pointed the way out. The sudden appearance of the husband and his determined look frightened her so that she screamed. That is the simple story.

Now for the newspaper version. After I had finished my part of the performance, I made my way back to New York. Imagine my surprise, on reaching the city not forty

minutes after my appearance in Brooklyn, to hear the paper boys crying, "Great sensation in Brooklyn Theatre! Full description! Horrible scenes!" etc., etc. I bought a paper, and there in big headlines was the description of the horrible scenes. The papers recorded that women screamed and rushed for the doors and fought each other—women and children were crushed; etc., etc.—and then they went on to describe that, when they were reassured there was no danger, there came the horrible duty of laying out the wounded, and fetching medical assistance. It simply read like some horrible catastrophe, and people were all talking about it. I listened, and each time I heard the "horrible details" getting worse, I thought "*one* woman had screamed!"

During my engagement in Brooklyn, I found I was under contract to show on Sunday. There was an agitation at the time against the Sunday shows. We were told that night by the management we were all to appear, but no one was to be allowed to make up. Personally, of course, I did not fancy the Sunday idea at all, although

my Dickens entertainment is good and wholesome enough for Sunday as for any other day. When the curtain went up on the Sunday night in question, police officers stood on each side of the stage to see if any one did make up or change their costumes. I had thought it well out, and so dressed in evening dress, and the officials wondered how I could go on and do my Dickens entertainment at all, since my characters necessitate a change for each one. When it came to my turn, I walked upon the stage and recited my own adaptation of "A Christmas Carol," entitled *Scrooge*, my idea of a good Sunday show. There is no doubt that "A Christmas Carol" is a beautiful lesson of goodness and charity. It was curious to see comedians without make-up, and some of their entertainments were as unfunny as it was possible to be. I heard afterwards that the funniest sight was one of Fred Karno's Company of comedians playing a knockabout comedy, all in evening dress. Sunday shows were for a time stopped, but they are now again in full swing.

I had the pleasure of visiting the Quaker City of Philadelphia, an opportunity I had not

had on my first tour. I found it very nice, but very quiet. Philadelphia, after New York, is the greatest change one could imagine. All is rush, bustle, excitement and late hours in New York; in the city of Philadelphia everything is quiet and shut up at eight o'clock. In New York, if a comedian wants what we term a "sure laugh," he will poke fun at Philadelphia in the following fashion. "I dreamed I had money—nice thing to dream about—etc., etc. I dreamed I lived in Philadelphia and died—you might just as well be dead as live there." This latter sentence brings a loud laugh and a round of applause. So in New York every one thinks it the right thing to laugh at Brooklyn. A couple of "cross-talk" comedians will talk about various places *in* America, and suddenly one will mention Brooklyn. The other will reply, "Say—Brooklyn's not *in* America—it's somewhere laying off America." Another laugh! It is curious, though, in private conversations, how bitter they get. I was once at a dinner party, and being introduced round. One lady said, "Oh, Mrs. ——, you should see Mr. Bransby Williams this week—he is at the

Orpheum Theatre, Brooklyn." The other lady laughed outright, and said, "My! sure you don't think I'll be coming to Brooklyn? We New Yorkers don't go to see anything in Brooklyn. You Brooklynites *have* to come to New York. Sure, I'll see Mr. Williams, but I guess it'll be when he is in 'Our City!'"

Still, I think, as a visitor, that Brooklyn has its chances of growing very large. Wonderful things happen in a short time in America. I saw remarkable changes in twelve months. New York cannot grow larger, but it can grow *higher*, and they do talk of going underground yet. New York being bounded by a river on each side *must* go up; and when one sees that wonderful "Singer" building, forty-one stories high, one can see what it means to go higher.

I found the Philadelphia audiences the quietest I have ever appeared before — so much so, that when the place was packed from floor to ceiling there was heard no applause for anything I did. It was awful! Yet, when I had finished, I was asked by the manager to step into his private room, and there I found myself in the midst of a body of pressmen,

Photo. by] [*Hana.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS (1908).

Facing page 152.

each holding out his hand congratulating me on a wonderful success. I simply stared, and said, "Well, gentlemen, if that silence is a token of success, what is a failure?" One gentleman said, "Wal, we don't make a noise, more especially over an intellectual entertainment like yours. But if they hadn't liked you they would have soon shown you, by walking out!" It was a pleasant surprise to find I was a success, and as the manager pointed out to me, the place was *full*, and remained full all through my engagement.

This theatre, "Keith's," Philadelphia, is one of the most wonderful theatres in the world. It is advertised as The Million Dollar Theatre. To describe it thoroughly is quite beyond me. We have nothing so fine in *theatres*, apart from music halls. There are three prices—one dollar, fifty cents, and twenty-five cents — equivalent to our four shillings, two shillings, and one shilling. The dollar-seat people occupy the floor in stalls. For the ladies there is an elaborate retiring-room with lady attendants, where everything is of the most expensive and beautiful. There are also a reading-room, a writing-room, with

stationery and post-cards free. The gentlemen have a writing-room, a reading-room, and a smoking-room. The latter is necessary, because there is, as I have said before, no smoking in American music halls—or, as they call them, Vaudeville theatres. There is a splendid system of cloak-rooms, all free. In the reading-rooms each edition of the newspapers is brought in as it is published. In the summer, under the theatre, there is machinery for pumping cold air over hundreds of blocks of ice into the theatre above, and the framework of the seats is hollow for the air to pass into—everything is cool.

In winter it is reversed, and hot air is pumped into the hollows, and your seat is warm. It is, in a word, wonderful. Ladies like Philadelphia because of its wonderful "stores." I hope I shall have the opportunity of revisiting Philadelphia to meet old friends.

Speaking of Keith's Million Dollar Theatre, Philadelphia, brings me to my second visit to Boston, where I appeared at his first famous theatre which was built before his Philadelphia house. The Boston theatre is more elaborate in its wealth of detail and ornament than the

Philadelphia one. In one corridor Mr. Keith has exposed pieces of most valuable china, ornaments, and pictures of fabulous value. It is more like a palace than a theatre.

My visit to Boston is memorable to me in many ways, one being that I had the opportunity of seeing the "Stock" company working. Here in England we have almost forgotten the old "stock" days, when a company of players appeared for a season at one theatre in a round of plays, changing the play weekly, except when the production is on a larger scale and is a success, such as *Human Nature*. I saw this played at the Boston Theatre under the name of *The Soudan*, and it had run for three weeks. It was splendidly played, and mounted as if for a run of a year. It was during the week of my Boston visit I studied this, and became friends with the majority of the company. On the Saturday night I had received my salary as "star" in Keith's Theatre, and hurried into the Boston Theatre, arriving in time for the Trafalgar Square scene, where the crowds of troops welcome home Captain Temple and his comrades. This part in England is associated

with the name of Henry Neville, who some years ago played it both at home and in America. Well, in this scene the crowd of supers were, of course, all Americans, even the soldiers were American, and what was strange to me was to see them all, or nearly all, chewing gum! I thought, "Here's a scene —dear old home—Trafalgar Square—oh, how I wish I were there for a while!" Then suddenly a thought came, "Why not?" The quickest journey ever dreamed of. I appealed to the stage manager that I might mount the Nelson Column as a super. No sooner said than done! and in a twinkling I was in Trafalgar Square, and the only Englishman there, cheering lustily as the British soldiers appeared.

The super-master presented me with a "nickel" for my services—this is about the value of $2\frac{1}{2}d.$ So in one night I was a "star" and a "super," and received the salary of each.

Oh, how I did admire the members of that stock company! I saw them produce *Trilby*. Each member gets to know the ways of the other, and all play together, gaining a most harmonious whole—and we in

England call "stock" old-fashioned, and pooh-pooh it! But, at any rate, America is training more actors in experience than we can ever hope to do under our present long-run and touring system. Here we have men who have played one part for years, and nothing else. There you find them playing a different part weekly, and becoming experienced in every way. Some here in England think that "schools" will save our stage. I am bold enough to say "Never!" and I ask some of the gentlemen who are interested in these schools if they honestly believe they can teach acting? I think they can teach technique, but never can they give the divine feeling and soul. And again I ask, "What school gave us Garrick, Kean, Macready, Phelps, Barry Sullivan, or Irving?" In my opinion, their school was the world of humanity and hardship, and most of all, "*stock*" experience. They became versatile with practice, and were able to go on for almost any parts in any plays. But nowadays, actors are labelled like so many articles and so many sizes; one man plays an eccentric style, and is always the same, always repeating *himself*, year after

year. Another is a villain, and gets no other kind of a part. Some day, if I have the chance, the good fortune and the money to spare, I hope to attempt the formation of a repertoire company. F. R. Benson is one of the only men giving the actor a chance of repertoire.

But I must draw in my line, for I find in talking of Boston I am beginning an essay on "The Stage in England." I merely state these things as what I saw and admired so much.

Altogether, my second visit to America pleased me even better than the first. It was during my New York engagement that one night a gentleman said, "Say, I want to tell you that Alan Dale, our great critic's there to-night. I guess he'll tell you what he thinks about you to-morrow." Alan Dale is a critic in New York who is perfectly fearless; he does not hesitate to state his opinion, offend or please. Some don't like him, of course, you may guess that those who "do not like him" are those whom he has severely criticized. There are some people who certainly have been "cut up," as we say—and many of them—and then say that criticism does not affect

them, and that no one takes any notice of it. I venture to differ, as when one receives a very favourable notice from such a man as Alan Dale, it certainly does do the subject of the same some good, and *vice versâ ;* and therefore it is much nicer to find yourself favourably noticed than otherwise. In my own case, the difference, or rather the effect, of the same was that every one was congratulating me, and when I made my appearance on the stage that day, I received an uproarious welcome—which seemed to say, "Now we know you're all right."

At the time of writing, I hope to be spared to revisit America, as I hold contracts to do so, and extend my tour into towns I have not yet visited.

CHAPTER XII

ROYAL COMMAND

When his Majesty, King Edward, had been on the throne nearly twelve months, and the mourning for the late Queen Victoria was at an end, the music-hall world was surprised —nay, almost startled—to hear that our chief comedian, Dan Leno, was commanded to appear at Sandringham before the royal family. It was the first time the music-hall stage had been honoured in such a marked manner. I was appearing that week in Plymouth, and sent Dan a telegram of congratulation. He was commanded to appear on the same day as Seymour Hicks was to appear as "Scrooge" in Dickens's "Christmas Carol." I never dreamed then that I should ever have so great an honour conferred upon me.

But in 1903, during the last week in

November, I was rehearsing at the Tivoli daily, and was feeling far from well. On returning home I found three telegrams had arrived in succession, requesting my presence at Mr. George Ashton's office. Mr. Ashton is the manager of all the royal performances. Whatever the King selects, Mr. Ashton executes the royal command. I arrived at the office in Bond Street, to find Mr. Ashton out. I was asked to wait, as the message was to be given me by Mr. Ashton himself. I never for a moment imagined that I was to hear anything more than a private drawing-room engagement. Mr. Ashton arrived, and in a few words communicated the fact that I was to appear at Sandringham on the Friday. I was to appear as a mimic and as a Dickens actor. I was to keep it quite secret until the day, and then acquaint the managers at the theatres where I was then appearing. Naturally, I was very excited, and very anxious. I had to get things ready and arrange my imitations in a way which I thought would suit his Majesty.

The day arrived. I despatched my telegrams acquainting the managers of my inability

to perform that night owing to my command to appear before the royal family. Arriving at St. Pancras, I found Mr. Ashton attending to my comforts for the journey, and ready to accompany me. We had a very pleasant journey, and I remember I practised many imitations on him to while away the time, and I know he will never forget that journey, even though he may forget me. Arrived at Wolferton, we found a Royal motor-car waiting to take us to the King's residence.

This was my first experience of a motor-car, and the rate it went made me think it would be my last. But no, I have enjoyed many rides since then, with such a distinguished motorist as Mr. S. F. Edge. On our arrival, we set to work arranging and rehearsing effects, and so on. Then came a "royal" dinner. At the last moment I began to think I had not seen much of the actors I was to imitate for a long time in the plays of the moment. I was then seized with an idea. "Why not present imitations in a new way? Give an impression of a big matinée, and all the stars appearing in parts of a conventional type in a conventional melodrama?" I was at once

struck by the idea, and suggested the same to Mr. Ashton. After a while he came and said, "Yes—most suitable to his Majesty."

Now I had set myself a task, and had to do it; so I took a walk in the grounds in a big overcoat and cap (it was dreadfully cold) and started rehearsing the idea. Being intent on the working out of the scheme, I had not taken particular notice of where I was going, and soon fell into the hands of a brawny gentleman who was evidently very much "on guard." He quietly questioned me, and requested that I would follow him. I found I was out of my bounds altogether, and had to give a full explanation of who I was and what I was doing. Having escaped this limb of the law, I made my way back to the room that had been reserved for me to dress in. By this time I had fairly arranged my thoughts into the order of presenting the actors and their respective *rôles*. I was getting very nervous, and that dreadful feeling of "stage fright" almost came over me. You must understand an actor gets into a terrible state of nervousness sometimes, even after his many rehearsals and even when perfect in his

words. Yet here was I going to speak lines I had never even written, but had only prepared a rough idea in my brain, and had to rely on my presence of mind, expression, and vocal powers of imitation. It was about this time, as I sat rather moodily waiting, that Mr. George Ashton came to me, looking very serious and very tragic. "My dear Williams," he said, "I am very sorry, but I cannot help it—it is my duty—you must accept this." He handed me a long envelope with Royal Arms on it. I almost trembled and wondered what was to happen next. First, I felt that there was to be no performance, and then that I had got into trouble for going into the private parts of the grounds. I opened it with trembling fingers, and Ashton watched me with a merry twinkle in his eye. I read, "Best wishes from the Angels." "Well, what does it mean?" I thought, surely there's nothing heavenly about this business yet. Then, on looking again, I found it was a telegraph form used only in Sandringham House —a long white paper, and in a long envelope, as I have already explained. This, then, was simply a message from Morris Angel and

Sons, the costumiers of Shaftesbury Avenue, a message of good luck. Of course I laughed and enjoyed the joke afterwards. During the next hour I received many more wires; for by this time the London papers had announced the honour conferred upon me.

To come to the performance itself. It took place in the White Ball-room, where a stage had been erected for Lewis Waller and his performance of *Monsieur Beaucaire*. When the guests were all seated, their Majesties the King and Queen entered the room to the strains of the National Anthem. I peeped through the curtain and saw the King bow slightly. But the action that affected me very much indeed was that he turned and waved slightly to the principal villagers or tenants who had been invited, and were in a small gallery at the back. At that moment I lost all my nervousness. I made my entrance, and presented a melodrama cast with Wilson Barrett, George Alexander, Sir Henry Irving, Beerbohm Tree, W. L. Abingdon, Sir Charles Wyndham, R. G. Knowles, Eugene Stratton, and Dan Leno. I did not expect applause, but I

received as much as I have ever had before, and at the end bowed, or, as we say, took about three calls. My work was not finished here. I was due after a few minutes' interval to reappear in a selection of Dickens characters.

When appearing in public in Dickens impersonations I am in the habit of just sitting down to make up with my back turned to the audience. For this occasion I made up facing the royal family, who were deeply interested in the process, and laughed heartily as the various changes came over my features. It was a great success from beginning to end, and to me, of course, a great event. When I had finished and was just dressed, I was sent for and presented to their Majesties. The King congratulated me on everything and expressed the pleasure he had derived, and chatted for a moment or two about the various actors I had imitated. After I had left the royal presence, I sat down to supper, when I had some fun, and caused some amusement among the attendants. In the early hours of the morning (and what a cold morning it was!) we started for King's Lynn. Before we retired to snatch a few hours' sleep,

however, we partook of hot grog. I was so tired and felt the reaction of the excitement greatly. One thing I shall always remember. The old lady, on showing me to my room, carried antique candlesticks in each hand, and on arriving at the door of my apartment, drew my attention to the picture over the door—and there I saw the famous engraving of Sir Luke Fildes' painting of "The Empty Chair at Gadshill."

In the morning we started for town. The majority of the King's guests went back to town by the same train as the royal house-party, which broke up overnight. It was a slow journey nearly all the way, owing to the fog. I arrived in town in time to keep faith with the Tivoli and Oxford managements at the matinée, and received a terrific reception at each place. I was very, very tired, but had not a moment to rest, for after the matinée I was interviewed at every turn. Evening arrived, and I appeared at three halls—the Tivoli, Oxford, and Metropolitan. I wonder how many calls I took that night! At the Oxford my reception was the greatest, and there I was so tired, and the strain of the

two days and hardly any rest, told its tale. I endeavoured to thank the public for their kind and hearty congratulations, but the effort was too much, and speaking with great emotion I broke down, and looking, I fear, a sorry spectacle, left the stage.

Naturally, for the time, I was a great attraction at these halls, as they, for their own purposes, had boomed and "billed" me. Yet when all was over and I went to draw my salary—which, by the way, was on an "old" contract, signed some long time before —imagine my surprise when I found the management had stopped my salary for the night I appeared before his Majesty! I was more grieved than pained, but it was not the loss of the night's salary that caused it.

On Sunday, December 20th I received, by special messenger from Buckingham Palace, a valued present from the King. It was a heavy silver cigarette case and match-box combined, with tinder cord attached, with the royal monogram in diamonds on the side. Naturally, I was and am very proud of this gift, and also of the letter accompanying it.

"Buckingham Palace,
"Dec. 20th, 1903.

"DEAR SIR,

"By command of the King and Queen I have the pleasure to send you the accompanying cigarette case, which their Majesties, believing you to be a smoker, hope you may find useful and helpful perhaps at times in reminding you of the 4th of this month at Sandringham, when you so much interested their Majesties and others who witnessed your clever imitations.

"I remain, Dear Sir,
"Yours faithfully,
"J. DIGHTON PROBYN,
"Gen[l].

"To Bransby Williams, Esq."

When in New York, November 9, 1907, I cabled a message of congratulation to his Majesty, King Edward VII. Some weeks afterwards, when I was appearing in Boston, I received a letter addressed "Bransby Williams, New York." This letter had been to three theatres in New York, one in Philadelphia, and finally found me in Boston. It was a

letter of thanks for my message to his Majesty. By the same post I received a letter from my little boy addressed "Bransby Williams, Broadway"—not even America, or U.S.A.—but it found me.

One day, just after my visit to Sandringham, I was very busy gardening at my home in Clapham Park. I had recently secured my house and was laying paths and turf, wearing, of course, suitable clothes for the task. My old pipe was in my mouth, and no doubt I looked anything but elegant. Some young fellows, evidently curious to get a glimpse of B. W., were looking over the fence, mumbling something. I heard one say, "Yes, that's him." "Garn away!" said the other. "What, *that?* Why, that's his blooming gardener! What—that him—with a dial like that!"

Another gardening story comes to my mind. Some years ago I was to be interviewed for a certain paper, and a man who was a real Dickensian was told off to do the interview. He was an American, and had never seen me before. He arrived at my house and found my side gate open, so in he

Photo. by] [*A. E. Peacock.*

THE GARDEN AT "ROSEMARY," BRANSBY WILLIAMS'S HOME.

[*Facing page* 170.

walked. I was wheeling some mould through in a barrow. I asked him whom he wanted, and he replied, "Bransby Williams, and would I tell them indoors." I thought it rather a good opportunity for a bit of fun; so I pretended to take his message. Returning, I told him Bransby Williams was engaged for a few moments, and would he care to look round the garden and wait. I then showed him all there was to see, and he gave me a shilling for my trouble. This I pocketed, thanked him, and then slipped round and came through the greenhouse and explained who I was. How he enjoyed the joke! But I stuck to his shilling, and feel I earned my tip, although my boy did wheedle it out of me afterwards.

CHAPTER XIII

DAN LENO AND OTHERS, AND SOME NOTABLE BENEFITS

DAN LENO—his name revives many memories—memories of the great pleasure and enjoyment he gave his audiences wherever and whenever he met them; memories of the many good actions the little man showed to others. Dan Leno's life was one of real hard work. He started at the bottom of the ladder, if ever a man did. He starved—he worked—he succeeded, and reached such a pinnacle of success that hard work, hard living, and the flattery of a certain class soon affected his poor brain, and he died an untimely death. Such a born comedian and humorist we have not seen since, and we have no equal to him to-day. No one of recent years has been so much missed by visitors of every age to Drury Lane as Dan Leno.

"To what did Dan Leno owe his prominence?" asks Mr. Hickory Wood, in his biography of the actor. "Hard work? Yes! But plenty of men have worked hard, with but poor results. A sense of humour? Naturally! But he shared that with many. A quaint presence? Partly! But the real cause of it was simply the possession of that marvellous gift which neither we, who have it not, nor I believe he who has it, can thoroughly understand—*personality*. He was Dan Leno, and in saying that, we say all. Surely among Britons there never lived a more universal favourite than he! He did not appeal to any particular class or section. He appealed to all, from the King to his humblest subject, from the child to its grandparents."

That is well said, and as it is not my purpose to write Dan Leno's life, I need not enlarge upon it. I want just to tell a few stories concerning him and his work. My first appearance at a West End music hall was as a deputy for Leno. Never shall I forget the buzz of disappointment when my unknown name was put out at the side of the stage at the Tivoli. I gave imitations of actors, and was sufficiently

successful to continue there some fourteen weeks. On the third night of my music-hall career I played at the "London," Shoreditch, Paragon, Canterbury, and Tivoli—at the latter three halls as Leno's deputy. On Leno's return to work, he watched me at the Tivoli and gave me some very kind words of encouragement, and from that moment I made a friendship which lasted to the end—though I regret to say my engagements called me far away from the poor little man when most he needed friendship.

I was once playing in Sunderland when Dan Leno was fulfilling an engagement in Newcastle. He was, however, staying in Sunderland with relations. I used to meet him coming in at night, and sometimes two or three of us would stand talking at the corner of a street. Stragglers and "noisy parkers" would gather and gape at us, for Dan was known to everybody. Seeing we were "observed," he would suddenly, in a fairly loud voice, say something after this style: "Well, boys, it's no good being downhearted! The man's evidently got away with all the money, and we're stranded! So come on,

boys—make the best of it! We've got to walk to London!"—and off we would go, leaving the listeners with their faces agape with astonishment. I was staying at the Queen's Hotel at the time, and on the Sunday morning Dan came to me and proposed that we should have a waggonette and make up a party to drive to Marsden Rock and the Pirates' Cave. It was settled, and our company comprised Dan and his wife, Peggy Pryde, myself, Dan's father-in-law and mother-in-law, and several others. The weather suddenly changed, and we came into a dense fog. We had to move slowly along the road, until we came to some lights, shining from what we found to be a village pub. Dan jumped down, knocked at the door, and asked for refreshment for the party. A short, merry time ensued, and we were off again. Within five minutes, another House of Call. Dan said, "Come on, boys!" and knocked. The question arose, where from? "Sunderland," was the answer, and we were soon admitted. Mark you, as Dan said, "It's the truth—we have come from Sunderland, only they haven't asked if we've called anywhere else." This

was repeated several times, and Dan was merry. It took us hours to get back, and when we did, we all landed at my hotel. There I ordered tea for the whole party. I need hardly say it made a hole in my then not large salary. Table cleared, and some of the commercial gentlemen joined us. Cigars and cigarettes were lighted—Dan, by the way, had never smoked in his life. Then stories were the order of the day. Dan told stories both humorous and pathetic, and kept us well alive. He told of the days when his mother and father used to play a sketch in which he appeared as a monkey. They had been "out" for some time, and penniless. They got an engagement, and in the scene where they sat down to the dinner and the monkey was at his pranks, the three of them ravenously ate the stale pastry and bread that represented the stage banquet, during which the audience screamed at the fun, whilst they satisfied their poor hungry bodies.

It was a joyous evening. Dan paid for everything, and those commercial men, I venture to say, had a glorious and cheap entertainment. There is usually some "outsider"

in a company, however, and he was there that night. When we were about to part, I proposed the health of Dan and his wife, and Dan afterwards said some complimentary things about me, as he always did about all his friends. He incidentally spoke of Dickens, telling them of the time when, one night in Belfast after their show, his father and mother took him to see Charles Dickens come out of the hall after one of his famous readings. As Dickens passed through the crowd, little Dan pressed forward, and Dickens patted his head and said, "Good night, my little man, and God bless you." Dan had never forgotten it, and was proud to relate the incident. As I stated, the "outsider" was there. This man, after partaking of Dan's generosity, and having had a private entertainment such as thousands would gladly have jumped at, in the heyday of Dan's great success, said in a speech that "they, of course, were pleased to meet Mr. Dan Leno, but begged to remind him that he and his friends were enjoying a privilege, as they had no real right in the commercial room." Mark you, the commercial room on a Sunday, and only

three commercial men in the hotel! Dan was very, very angry, and we were all disgusted. Going out, Dan put a sovereign in the Commercial Travellers' Orphan box, saying, "Well, the kids, poor things, can't help such as he!"

It was during this week that Dan sang seven songs at one of his performances, and at the conclusion a voice from the gallery said, "Eh—cut your cackle, and bring on your clogs!" This, after an hour's hard work!!!

At Christmas, 1897, there was a pantomime produced at the Grand Music Hall, Clapham. All the parts were played by children of well-known performers. Among them was Georgina Leno, Dan's daughter. Harry Randall's daughter, I remember, played Fairy Queen, and Charles Denier Warren, son of Charles Warren, of "Witmarks," was also in the cast. The scenery was all painted by Dan Leno, for he was very interested in drawing and painting, and during his enforced rest, when his brain gave way, he painted many pictures, some of them remarkable too, considering his condition at the time.

I remember the pantomime when he

reappeared at Drury Lane after his illness, and had a reception—such a shout of welcome being one that must live for ever in the memory of all who were privileged to be present and hear it. I called on him to shake hands on Christmas morning, and he was hard at work making a property fowl he was to use, and before leaving he took me downstairs to see a large panorama, every bit of it made and painted by himself. He was very proud of it —although I never remember him so proud as when he sold several loads of hay from his field at the back of his house. I think then he felt quite an old farmer!

It was always his delight to be among children, and in 1898 or 1899, I think, he gave a huge garden-party, inviting children for the day, and the grown-ups at night. What a day they had, too! Nothing was spared, everything was plentiful—in fact, lavishly thrown away. He worked and clowned all day, and at night, when I remember calling, they were all getting pretty worn, and Dan was worn out and rather angry, for he felt he was being taken advantage of. The servants had taken all sorts of liberties, and one or two of them

had partaken too freely of the "flowing bowl." His coachman had, among the rest, and came across the lawn, saying, "Now then, Dan, come on, hurry up—the duchess is waiting!" This roused Dan, and he lost his temper somewhat. But the worst was to come, and I have often roared with laughter since, when I think of the kind-hearted Dan in such a rage that we all had to laugh, until finally he laughed too. The finishing touch was put to it when he found that two or three constables had got over the wall and were helping themselves also. He said, "Well, when the police are in and help themselves, I'm done!"

The coachman's remark about the duchess related to one of the famous entertainments given by the Duchess of Sutherland at Stafford House. Dan was so dead beat, and was getting so crotchety over the liberties being taken with him, that he said, "Oh! let the duchess look after her guests, and I hope she hasn't got as much to do as I have!" And so Dan Leno appeared with his own guests, and not with those of the duchess.

The storm soon blew over, and he had forgiven every one, and set himself to make

From a Drawing by] [*W. Hartley.*

DAN LENO IN PANTOMIME.

[*Facing page* 180.

the conclusion of the show as bright as the opening. He came and put his arm through mine, and said, "Now, come on, Bransby Dickens, you and I will make some fun." Then a sudden inspiration came to him, and he said, "By Jove! I have it! I'll do Dickens!"

"Right," said I; "and I'll do Leno."

At the moment, I really did not think he meant it, though it was well known he would do anything for a bit of fun. He not only meant it, but was not long in executing the idea. Very soon an audience was gathered in the large drawing-room, and when he seriously announced he would give a selection of characters from Dickens, all eyes were turned on me, and then there was a roar! To see Dan Leno twisting and twirling and rubbing his hands in burlesque of Uriah Heep was excruciating, although all the lines he used were, "Oh, my word! Mr. Copperfield! Oh! oh! I'm so humble, Mr. Copperfield! Good-bye, Mr. Copperfield! Bless you, Mr. Copperfield! Oh! oh! Curse him! Good-bye, Dolly Gray!"

Then Dan Leno as Sydney Carton! When

he tried to look very romantic and sad—the laughter grew louder,—and when at last he came to the line, "It's a far, far better thing that I do now than I have ever dood—oho! It's a far, far better show than the rest of Bransby Dickens Williams, etc., etc.," I can honestly say I had never heard such laughter. I then had to have my revenge, and up to that period I had never been known to imitate any of the more famous comedians, so the laugh was pretty general when they heard my announcement that "I will do Dan Leno." I gave imitations of him in several of his then most famous songs, such as "The Horseshoe on the Door." Every one seemed to enjoy the joke, including Dan himself. It occurred to me afterwards, that if I had passed muster with an audience who knew every tone of his voice and movement of his face, I might succeed publicly. A week or two after this, we gave the public a little fun in the same way. I introduced an imitation of Dan on a Saturday at the matinée at the Tivoli. Dan, who followed me on the programme, had arranged, unknown to me, to imitate me, and use my music. So when I heard the

familiar strains from the orchestra, I rushed out of my dressing-room to the side of the stage, to see what was on, and there I beheld Dan, with his back to the audience, pretending to make his face up in a shop window on the scene. Having put on a terribly wild-looking thing for a wig, he turned round as Carton—what a roar went up! and how that laughter lasted! Yet he never moved a muscle, but stood quite serious, and, of course, looking ridiculously grotesque. I at once rushed back to the dressing-room, made up as Dan Leno, and walked on the stage. Taking him under my arm, I carried him off, amidst the delighted yells of the audience.

Another time, at the London Pavilion, at a matinée, I was giving imitations, and when the moment came for me to "do" Dan Leno, lo! and behold, Dan and his great pal, Herbert Campbell, came into the box at the side. Dan commenced "chipping in," as we call it. I then addressed myself to him with the well-known query, "Do you know Mrs. Kelly? Oh, my word, you *must* know Mrs. Kelly!" Dan in a very serious tone replied, "No!" By this time, the audience realized there was

some good fun on hand. I talked to Dan in *his* voice, and he replied—it must have sounded strange, the same voice from two men. Suddenly he slipped out of the box, and very soon returned with half a dozen boxes of chocolate, with which he pelted me "as a present from Mrs. Kelly."

Some years ago, when benefits were more fashionable than they are now, one was arranged for the late Vernon Dowsett, who was then manager of the Tivoli. A few of us arranged a small programme, and included in it was an old farce called *Clotilde.* It was played with the following cast: Dan Leno, the villain—such a villain! a red shirt, huge top boots, and a belt with pistols and revolvers galore. Eugene Stratton, for the nonce with a white face, appeared as Clotilde, the heroine. How we laughed at 'Gene laying on grease paint. Of course he was far more used to his burnt cork. Johnny Danvers was a doctor, and Edwin Barwick was a footman; the Brothers Griffiths also played parts. I played the pretty novelette hero; Marie Lloyd and Billee Barlow played my sweethearts, although my real love scene was

with 'Gene. James Fawn played the heavy father.

The two things most impressed on my memory of that performance are that when they were nearly ready to ring up, they were all in a state of suspense trying to find me. No B. W. to be found! It was a great laugh for me, because I was quietly standing in the wings, but no one recognized me. I was made up as a very "pretty boy," with fair wig and golden drooping moustache of the Hal Ludlow type, and when I announced myself as ready, they simply stared to think no one had recognized me. The other memory is that everybody died or was killed during the piece; and as each character was disposed of, he or she was laid in a row, each finding a comfortable place next to the other in which to die. The heroine (Stratton) met her death by swallowing her jewellery. I killed Leno in a most awful combat. The last character to come on was the father (James Fawn). He stood looking at the row of corpses, boasting he alone would live, when Angelo Asher, the conductor of the orchestra, stood up in his place, and raising a revolver,

cried "Liar! you die also!" Jimmie Fawn then sought a place at the end of the row and died with ease and comfort. Then came down a small white sheet for a curtain, with the announcement on it "To be continued in our next." All the corpses forthwith turned over together, and put their feet towards the audience, and with one accord raised their heads and winked at them all. The curtain at last fell to enormous enthusiasm, as all took calls, and closed a most memorable performance.

There was another never-to-be-forgotten benefit—Frank Glenister's, at the London Pavilion, when the famous "Doo-da-day" minstrels appeared—and what a "star" company it was, and how well equipped was each for the task! We all "blacked" up, and seriously gave a real minstrel entertainment. This was the day when 'Gene Stratton was in his burnt-cork element, and laughed at us all washing ours off—most of us seemed to wash it more on than off. The corner men of this troupe were Dan Leno (the funniest thing I've ever seen—Dan with a black face),

the famous G. W. "Pony" Moore, Eugene Stratton, Joe Elvin, Tom and Fred McNaughton, and Harry Randall. The interlocutor was Herbert Campbell, who gave a fine performance and made up splendidly. Then sitting around as the vocalists and serious men, all well-dressed and blacked, was this company: Albert Christian, Alec Hurley, George Lashwood, Harry Freeman, Walter Bellonini, Brothers Griffiths, James Norrie, and myself. As the "boy" of the troupe on a stool sat Big Ben Brown, who sang the choruses afterwards from the circle. Eugene Stratton revived his "Whistling Coon," and Joe Elvin, our popular cockney comedian, sang "Little Dolly Daydream" in a style as unlike a nigger as it is possible to imagine. Later in the programme we all sang "Poor old Joe." Joe Elvin had been let down a trap, and answered the chorus in a sepulchral voice from below. Dan Leno sang "The Funny Little Nigger"—surely the funniest ever seen. This performance will be most memorable to us all, as it was the very last appearance in public of G. W. "Pony" Moore. The veteran "blacked up" and was in harness

again for that day; and at the end, when he introduced an old finale of the Moore and Burgess Minstrels, he sang many old-time melodies. As he proceeded, he got more and more excited and emotional, and when he came to the last notes and the curtain was falling, the old man's voice failed him and he burst into tears. He was a world-famous comedian, and I shall never forget that I was a nigger with him on that day.

Another "star" benefit was that of Joe Elvin, at the old South London. Joe Elvin, always popular among the "sports," was naturally well supported by them. On every side some familiar face could be recognized. The piece selected was *Over the Sticks*, by Wal Pink. The cast was as follows:—

Rebecca	Miss Marie Lloyd.
Jessie	Miss Vesta Victoria.
Bob Rickets	Mr. Bransby Williams.
Clerk of the Scales ...	Mr. Wal Pink.
Tipster	Mr. Arthur Reece.
Eel Man	Mr. Fred Griffiths.
Police Sergeant ...	Mr. Joe Griffiths.
Extra Jockey	Fred Griffiths, Junr.
Arthur Pilks	Mr. Harry Tate.
Plodder Pilks	Mr. Joe Elvin.

In addition to the cast of speaking parts as above, the racecourse scene was remarkable, for the crowd was composed of well-known boxing men, racing men, and bookies, including Dick Burge, Pedlar Palmer, Charlie Mitchell, and others. Tom White's Arabs, famous in those days, were the itinerant niggers of the course. Harry Tate was playing Joe's twin brother, and at his first entrance, so good were the voice and make-up, the audience rose to it, and thought it was Joe.

Dan Leno was unable to be at this particular benefit.

Speaking of benefits reminds me of yet another at the Haymarket Theatre in aid of the widow and orphans of a clever actor, Royce Carlton. It was the year of the frightful influenza epidemic, and this day was referred to as "the day of understudies." J. L. Toole, Irving, Wyndham, Nelly Farren, Arthur Roberts, and many others, all were off ill, not only at the benefit, but at their own theatres. Eugene Stratton that day revived "The Dandy Coloured Coon" and "The Whistling Coon," and, after having sung them thousands of times, was what we call "dried up," and

each time that he made a start was worse off. Eventually he gave it up, and danced the rest till off. Mrs. Bernard Beere recited "The Portrait," and William Terriss came in a hurry and followed with "Fra Giacomo," both pieces being very heavy and of the same description.

This reminds me that I was once at a benefit at St. Martin's Town Hall, and was waiting to follow William Terriss. He recited "The Dandy Fifth"—the very piece I had chosen; so I went on and told the audience, as a joke, that it was the only thing I knew, and that I had had to buy a packet of "Dandy Fifth" cigarettes to learn it, so that all I could do was to imitate Terriss doing it, which I did.

Another time, at a special concert for the "*Referee* Children's Dinner Fund," I was down to do "The Dandy Fifth" again, and in came Martin Harvey in a hurry and forestalled me! Since then I have taken good care never to have ready a hackneyed recitation, and so I stick mostly to my own. There is a disadvantage even in that when you have your numbers published. I turned up as a "star" to assist at a small concert once. Imagine my surprise when, on announcing my

own poem, I found it had just been done by quite an unknown concert artiste, who had got well away before I came in.

Once on a huge Christmas programme at the Tivoli there were three *raconteurs* who each told the same story, neither ever dreaming the other was including it in his repertoire. G. W. Hunter came early in the programme, R. G. Knowles about the middle, and Burt Shephard at the end. You can imagine their faces when they found out what was the matter, and also those of the audience when it was repeated.

Before leaving my good friend Dan Leno, let me relate two more stories about him. When quite a lad, Dan was sent by his father to deputize at some place—I think at Oldham. He had scarcely ever appeared alone, except as a clog-dancer. He arrived at this place very tired and very, very hungry. He interviewed the "boss," a burly, rough man, who looked him over, and told him to go into the concert-room and start at once. But he first took him into his confidence.

"See here, lad," he said, "I'm telling thee —by rights I ought to close oop, but it's th'

only busy time. Yer see, ma bruther's dead oopstairs, so thou can go in and sing, but thou mustna' dance."

Poor Dan! he hardly had any voice, but he *could* dance. However, he went in and started. Soon his voice got worse. The boss sent him a mug of tea. Dan afterwards described it as looking more like mint-sauce, because the water had never boiled. Anyhow, it was better than nothing, and he needed it badly. I might mention he had got to sing to the customers the best part of each day for a week, and would receive eighteen shillings and his keep. Well, he made another start, and the room began to fill with real rough fellows, who began to murmur, "Shoot oop! Shoot oop thy singing and put on thy clogs!" The room was really getting full, and poor Dan, feeling a bit nervous, went to the landlord, and, in a husky voice, begged to be allowed to dance. The boss, looking through the little window and seeing business brisk, said—

"All reet, lad, thou can go in and dance quiet like; yon . . . oopstairs" (meaning the dead brother) "will know nowt aboot it!"

In these dancing days, as we will call them, there was a competition in every town. If I remember rightly, it was in Sunderland, the night of this story, that Dan danced as he had never danced before, and was cheered to the echo. At the conclusion of his turn the gentleman—an old performer—who at that time was running a "Performing Peacock Show," stepped forward and commenced to make a speech. Dan was called to stand on the stage—very surprised, and at the same time full of wonder as to what he was to receive. Mr. —— (who shall be nameless) then enlarged upon the wonderful performance of Dan, and went on to say that the working-lad admirers had made a collection among themselves, and were anxious to give Dan a beautiful gold watch, suitably engraved. He was holding the watch in his hand, and Dan's eyes sparkled. The audience roared their approbation. He then hoped that, in the years to come, Dan would always remember the love of the boys of Sunderland, and so forth. The watch was handed with great ceremony to Dan, who tried to make a speech. He started by saying he couldn't believe it was

true, such kindness; and by this time the tears were in his eyes, and he told them he could not thank them in speech, but would dance his thanks. And dance he did as though his life depended on it. After the cheering had subsided he sat on the side of the stage, done up, and almost in tears—tears of gratitude—when Mr. —— took the watch from his hands, and said—

"Well, Dan, what do you think of that for a good *gag?*"

Poor Dan realized he had been "spoofed." Wounded in every way, his grief and surprise caused him at last to lose his temper, and he royally cursed Mr. —— and his peacocks.

The next time they met, Dan was beginning to mount the ladder as a "star" in London. Mr. —— and his peacocks were on the bill at the Oxford. The peacocks were arranged on a stand; Mr. —— advanced, made his speech, informing the audience how the peacocks at the word of command would move their tails to and fro to the time of the music. He stepped back, and after some preliminary posing and other business the orchestra started, and the peacocks commenced

the musical tail business. Then, all of a sudden, a little dog ran on the stage barking, and the peacocks, being frightened, flew into the auditorium, leaving their *tails* behind them on the stand, opening and closing and moving to the music. Such a roar you never heard. Dan joined in as Mr. —— beat a hasty retreat and the curtain was lowered. Strange, but true!

CHAPTER XIV

JOHN L. TOOLE AND "87, OR THE VETERAN'S BIRTHDAY"

It is one of the great pleasures of my life to think that I can boast of having had John L. Toole as a friend. "He was allays wery good to me, he was," as poor Joe said of another; and I appreciated every little thing he said and did for my benefit. I always acted on his advice, and have never regretted doing so.

When it was first suggested I should play in pantomime, many of my friends dubiously shook their heads and made me hesitate. It was Toole, however, who said, "My boy, you are versatile enough for anything; go in and you'll win"; and I did. The first telegram I received on the awful first night was worded thus: "My love and best wishes for a big success.—J. L. Toole." I received scores from other friends—so many, indeed, that my

dresser amused himself by papering my room with them. But Toole's was framed and hung over my dressing-table.

My first appearance on the music halls was as a mimic, but I gradually tired of the usual imitation of Mr. So-and-So as So-and-So, and I told Toole of my trouble. He at once suggested that I should give a speech from *Hamlet* in imitation of the various actors who had declaimed it. In his young days he himself used to do another speech, "'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother," etc., as the various actors of his time rendered it. I thought the idea a good one, and brought it up to date and arranged it so that it was in keeping with my particular style. Special music was written for me, and I used my make-up table as I do in my character sketches, and gave imitations completely dressed and made up like the originals I was imitating. As a contrast to the more serious side, I introduced well-known comedians attempting the moody Dane, and when at a loss for a word I used their own gags and business. "Dan Leno as Hamlet" is still called for by my friends even now.

I was frequently in Toole's company, and when business called me to Brighton during his invalid days, I never missed spending all my available time with him. I very often used to pay Sunday visits to him, and I never grudged the time taken out of my busy life, for he was always so delighted to see old friends, and the pleasure such little attentions gave him made it a real pleasure to perform them. Sometimes there would be a few private friends to dinner, but his little parties were made up usually of old friends and comrades. I was, of course, too young to be classed with the latter, but I was proud to be considered one of the former.

I only saw him once on the stage, and that was in *Walker, London*, when Seymour Hicks was quite a beginner and playing a comedy part with him. Lawrence Irving, too, was making his début in the first piece, *Daisy's Escape*.

Although the little gatherings at his Brighton dinner-table were enjoyable and pleasant, for the reason that they afforded Toole "happy days," as he termed it, they were, nevertheless, a little pathetic at times. After dinner was

over, he would raise his glass as well as he could (latterly, the dear old man was fed), and whisper to us all "Happy days," to which we would respond "Same to you, Gov., and our love." He would then give a knowing look in my direction, and I knew what he meant. I then raised my glass to drink to him as from "absent friends," imitating the voice and manner of each of those he always held dear. I would perhaps commence with George Alexander, and, in his voice, say a few words to the "Gov." as we always called him. He would then respond to George Alexander. This would be followed in the same way by Sir Charles Wyndham, Beerbohm Tree, and so on. I invariably reserved his dear old friend Sir Henry Irving to the last, and he would beam at Irving's voice and say, "God bless you, Harry!" Once, after he had been very low-spirited and sad—for he used to have fearful fits of depression—he said, "Give me a bit of Dan Leno." I, of course, did my best, and he would laugh heartily. It was curious to me sometimes to think how my poor attempts to people his room for him with his friends gave him so much pleasure.

He was always very sad at parting in his latter years. He used to kiss us like children, and I well remember how touching it seemed to many well-known actors, comrades, and friends. We would all of us kiss him as he murmured to each, "God bless you, my boy! I don't think I'll ever see you again!" It was all very touching, and many a time we would be lost for words and part in silence.

When Irving died it seemed to break Toole's heart completely, and for a long time he was very weak indeed, and felt the loss of his lifelong friend so much that he was often found in tears. Irving was always in his thoughts, and soon after his death Toole had several little medallions made of his friend's profile, and the one he put on my watch-chain has remained there ever since.

During one of my engagements in Brighton Toole came to the theatre and sent round asking me to give Serjeant Buzfuz, and the old Grandfather in "The Old Curiosity Shop." I, of course, at once fell in with his wishes. The Grandfather and the death of Little Nell made him quite sad. When I had finished, the old Gov. leaned forward and beckoned me

From a Snapshot.]

SIR HENRY IRVING AND J. L. TOOLE.

[*Facing page* 200.

to the box and gave me a note. This I opened, and it said, "Herewith please find Private Box, with compliments from J. L. Toole." It read, you see, like the manager's ticket for a box at the theatre. Well, the "box" was handed to me, and proved to be one of the largest and finest boxes of mixed chocolates I have ever seen. It was for my little daughters.

Serjeant Buzfuz, he told me, revived memories of his old days, when he played the part, and recalled the fact that Serjeant Ballantyne, the original of the character, gave him his wig and gown to use in this character. These, by the way, were promised to me, as most of his stage wardrobe was; but, alas! they were sold in bundles as if they were goods in an old Jew's second-hand shop. There is nothing I regretted more. However, I was able to become possessor of one of his costumes later. Dear George Shelton, so many years with the dear old Gov., bought the "Caleb Plummer" clothes Toole wore in the part, and presented them to me. I have them now, and hope to use the old sack-coat in the part at some future date. I recently had an

opportunity of possessing another valued relic of my friend. Some time during the "early sixties," as the old mummer is wont to commence a story, Charles Dickens, when visiting Birmingham on a reading tour, paid a visit to a hotel called "The Hen and Chickens." The proprietor had a fine old model of "The Maypole Inn" (which plays such a prominent part in "Barnaby Rudge"), with several of the characters of the book grouped round the doorway. Dickens was very much struck with it, and was anxious to own it. But the proprietor prized it too, and declined to part with it even to Dickens. So dear old big-hearted J. L. Toole tried his persuasive powers on the old man, trying to buy it for himself, so that he might present it to Dickens. No! the old landlord had made up his mind. Still, he promised that whenever he gave up business Toole should have first offer. The model did at last come to Toole; but, as he remarks in his "Reminiscences," "Alas; it was too late—Charles Dickens had recently been laid to rest in Westminster Abbey."

It remained in Toole's possession, and occupied a place of honour in his house at

Photo. by] [*Campbell-Gray, Ltd.*

MODEL OF THE "MAYPOLE" INN.

[*Facing page* 202.

Maida Vale to the day of his death. I was fortunate enough to be the successful bidder at the well-remembered sale, and am proud to be the owner of what Dickens himself so much liked and wanted. It is becoming quite famous now, as I have lent it to the "Dickens Exhibition," and have refused big monetary offers to part with it.

Whilst speaking of Toole, I should like to relate the story of a sketch so closely associated with him. It was the dear old man's birthday. He was at that time in private apartments at Brighton. The sun was shining, and his room was a bower of beautiful flowers, all sent by loving friends. At his side on the table were shoals of telegrams from the youngest actor to the oldest—actor managers, great men in the world of art, and old comrades, too—each message touched the old man, and the tears were in his eyes as he murmured, "God bless them for remembering me." At the time I write of, his Majesty the King was recruiting his health on his royal yacht at Cowes after the operation that nearly cost Great Britain one of the best rulers it ever had. His Majesty, ever an admirer and friend and patron of

Toole, even then remembered him, and in addition to all his other tokens of friendship came a message from the King. This completely unnerved the dear old chap, and he tried to stand up and say, "God save the King!" but could only just sob out, "God bless him! God bless him!" It was deeply pathetic. It struck me to the quick, and I shall never forget the incident as one of the most dramatic I have witnessed, on or off the stage. I could not get it out of my mind, and I can see it now as though it were only yesterday. A day or two after, it occurred to me what a dramatic sketch it would make; but then came the thought—would the public rise to the occasion if the subject of it was an actor? No! but a soldier? Yes, that's it! a soldier! So I set to work and fixed up data, and studied some of the Crimea history, and had a long talk with an old veteran who was then doorkeeper at the Empire, Liverpool. With the help of a few stories from him, I wrote the sketch called *87, or The Veteran's Birthday.* Those who saw the production, whether in London or in the big provincial towns on my tour will remember the details

Photo. by] [*Foulsham & Banfield.*

"'87; OR, THE VETERAN'S BIRTHDAY."

[*Facing page* 204.

and idea of it. I had flowers shaped as a V.C., the figures "87," a cannon, and other military accessories — everything that would enhance the picture of an old Colonel's birthday. Then came the messages from Generals, friends, relatives (instead of the actors as in the real case), and at the end came the message from the King. The climax of the sketch was reached when the old soldier murmured, "God bless him!" and stood up to the salute at "God save the King!"—and died. I have just barely related the story as I adapted it, merely concluding the sketch with the death of the old warrior.

When it was produced it received many kindnesses, and my work was very favourably noticed. But several journalists, and some of them personal friends of mine, were quite angry, and "slated" me and the sketch, declaring I had set out to copy Sir Henry Irving in *Waterloo*. Nothing had been further from my mind. One gentleman met me at a dinner soon after, and said: "Williams, I can never forgive you for your copying Irving." So you see how I fared in doing what I considered a study from nature. One

might say with equal justice that Charles Godfrey had copied Conan Doyle when he played his veteran years before — or shall we say Dion Boucicault, a great many years before even Conan Doyle or even Sir Henry had made a name? Boucicault wrote and played a one-act piece called *The Old Guard*, in which a French veteran appeared whose one god was Napoleon, and who never did anything without first asking himself, "What would the Emperor think?"—just as Brewster idolized Wellington. So, after all this, who can claim to be *original!*

CHAPTER XV

WILLIAM TERRISS—CLEMENT SCOTT—PHIL MAY

WILLIAM TERRISS—the very name, to those who knew him or saw him—suggested life. He was nicknamed "Breezy Bill." There are many fine and interesting stories told of him. He was a bold, bluff, good-hearted hero such as he himself represented so often and so well on the stage. One little incident is related in so few words by Miss Ellen Terry, which is typical of him. He arrived at the theatre one night, wet from head to foot. Some one said, "Looks wet outside!" "Yes," said Terriss, "'tis rather wet." But he did not tell them how he had got wet. It afterwards came out he had jumped from a boat into the Thames and saved a life—he had saved many in his time.

How do I remember Terriss? Well, just as a good kind man to a young actor. I

was invited to see him one night in his room at the Adelphi. I told him I was anxious to give an imitation of him. He looked at me at first as if to say, "How dare you?" But he didn't say it. He was just kindness itself. He dictated a speech to me, and then stood up and gave it off for my benefit; then sent me round to the front to see how he would do it again on the stage.

Well, I gave the imitation. The piece was taken from the play, *Boys Together*, and he saw it and congratulated me. I remember his surprise on first meeting me. He was impressed with my youth; he had seen me before, but, as he said, he quite imagined me about forty-five or fifty, and that I must have been through some stock seasons. It was Bill Terriss who said to me, "Play anything and everything anywhere and everywhere, if you want to succeed!" I took his advice, and have profited by my various experiences in consequence.

He seemed greatly interested in me, and at one time asked if I would care to go with Irving. Of course I appreciated his kindness and quietly thanked him, but I said "*No!*"

somewhat emphatically. I shall never forget his expression of face and tone when he said, "What! you mean to say you refuse a chance of being with Irving?" I replied that I was young and ambitious, and that to go with Irving—such a great personality—I should be buried, as no one ever shone out with such a light of magnetism as Irving on the same stage. I knew I might just drift into being a sort of useful man in small parts and be programmed "Soldier" or "Servant"—Mr. B. Williams; and I know now I was right, for how many names of men who were ordinary members of the Lyceum Company then are notable figures to-day, save Martin Harvey, Forbes Robertson, and a few others? So you see I lost the chance of being a Lyceum actor, and became a music-hall star.

The night of the 16th December, 1897, was struck a blow that robbed the stage of a great man and made strong men shed tears, so sudden and so awful was Terriss's death. Arriving at the stage door, he was struck down by a maniac's stab in the back.

Her Majesty Queen Victoria, in an autograph letter to the widow, said, "She deeply

feels the loss which has robbed the English stage of one of its brightest ornaments."

The night of the 16th December, 1897, is deeply graven on my memory. I was appearing at the Tivoli, Oxford, and Canterbury. I had just finished at the Oxford, and was driving to the Tivoli. On arriving at the stage door, the dresser, knowing I was a friend of Will Terriss, instead of breaking it gently, met me with the news like a thunderclap.

"What do you think, sir? Terriss is murdered!"

On reaching my dressing-room I was soon aware that the terrible news was only too true. I was shocked and broken-hearted. I was at the time giving my usual imitations, and I dressed and made my appearance. You must understand the audience knew nothing of what had happened, and many had come over from the Adelphi after having been dispersed from there, little knowing the real tragedy that had just taken place. I was giving an awful show, when several voices were heard calling for my imitation of Terriss. It was a horrible idea to me, and so grieved

was I that I just managed to finish what I was doing and staggered off with my face wet with tears. Very soon after, a friend in front, who knew nothing of the cause of my abrupt finish, did what so many do when a public man is unable to do his best—that is, immediately jumped to one conclusion—drink! He sent a note saying he regretted that success had so soon turned my head, and how sorry he was to see me make a public exhibition of myself.

By this time we all knew that poor William Terriss had breathed his last and made his final exit from the stage of life. Little can the public imagine what sadness was within the Adelphi Theatre where his comrades had seen him—their friend and hero—die. I was due at the Canterbury, Westminster Bridge Road, next, and there I drove. As I drew up at the stage door I suddenly remembered that five years before a man named Letine had been fatally stabbed at that very door. This served to make me feel more depressed than ever. I tried hard to pull myself together, but failed utterly, and was forced to decline to appear. That night, one hoarse cry was

heard all over London—"Murder of William Terriss," and at each cry, as it struck my ears, a fearful pang went through me. How many thousands were thus affected!

Coming now to the day of his funeral—such a funeral—only one other exceeded it in numbers and real public sympathy, and that was Dan Leno's, when the costers in the street threw their little bunches of flowers on to the hearse. I attended the last public service to our good comrade, going privately and alone to the cemetery; and as I drew nearer to the spot, the crowd grew denser, and on arriving at the gates I found there were not hundreds, but thousands. Never was such a crowd! True, many were deeply grieved, but there were also many who were only curious to see so many actors off the stage, and in their scrambles to satisfy their curiosity, many beautiful graves were trampled underfoot. One incident stands out in my memory. In one part where the crowd were pushing to the roadway, three people were quietly crossing the cemetery unnoticed. They were Sir Henry Irving and Seymour Hicks, supporting the dead man's comrade, Jessie Millward.

And so that day was laid to rest England's acknowledged hero of the stage; and we have never replaced him with any one capable of such a breezy, vigorous, romantic, and lovable personality.

There is a fine memorial to him, and a most suitable one, considering his seafaring experiences, and how many lives he saved at sea—I mean the fine lifeboat and lifeboat-house at Eastbourne. The last letter Terriss ever wrote was to send a cheque to the lifeboat men of Margate for their work during the great storm the week before.

I only had the pleasure of meeting the late Clement Scott once or twice, not in the heyday of his success, but when he was broken by the falling away of old friends, many of whom had to thank him for some kind words or public encouragement of their work. His friends deserted him all through a rash statement, somewhat exaggerated by an interviewer, which appeared in a daily paper. Only those who have been interviewed know how often sentiments are altered in an endeavour to perpetrate a feat of memory, instead of taking notes, or even to cause a little sensation.

My last interview with him was at his house in Woburn Square. I called in connection with some business. I was, at the time, reciting to living pictures of his famous poems, which were composed as pleas to the Crown for a Victoria Cross for valour to policemen, miners, firemen, etc. He never lived to know that his Majesty has conferred a medal of equal honour on such as he pleaded for. He reminded me that Terriss had always called me "Young Bill," owing to my always wearing a tweed soft hat, one of my little vanities. Scott was, I think, one of Terriss's most intimate friends. I remember being asked by him to give him a few words as Terriss. I complied, and can see him even now, with bowed head, wiping away a tear.

Clement Scott was, I should say, one of the most popular critics of the day. He certainly was one of the most enthusiastic. He knew the popular taste, and he was undoubtedly the man for his post. I have been in the theatre when Scott was cheered in taking his seat on a first night; and I remember the other side of the picture once, when I was appearing at the Tivoli. Instead of the place

of honour, he had to take any old vacant seat, on the outside row of the stalls. It was a sad sight.

What a wonderful experience he had, and what vast knowledge he possessed of the stage! But one sees to-day sometimes a lad sent to criticize, and one feels like telling the lad to read Clement Scott's "Drama of Yesterday and To-day," or some of the criticisms of that grand old man, Joseph Knight.

I met Phil May many times at dinners and banquets. Phil May—what a genius! Only one enemy in the world, and that was Phil May. I was once making some Dickens sketches in an autograph book, and who should stand looking over my shoulder but the great artist himself. My poor pen became paralyzed —or rather, its holder did—and I could not proceed. But he said a few kindly words to me about them, and we then began to talk of his work and of Dickens, and he told me that it was intended that he should illustrate a special edition of "David Copperfield." I think the world missed something when Phil May died. I am sure the whole world of Dickensians would have been delighted with

his realization of Dickens characters. What quaint studies we should have had of Micawber and Mrs. Micawber! He promised me a sketch of Micawber, but, alas! it was not to be! Phil May, a great artist, died years before his time.

CHAPTER XVI

BEERBOHM TREE—GEORGE ALEXANDER—FORBES ROBERTSON—AND SIR CHARLES WYNDHAM

In pursuing my studies for perfecting, to the best of my ability, my imitations of various actors, I have made many friends amongst those whose peculiar characteristics and traits furnish me with models. Some, naturally, do not care to be "imitated." Yet, speaking generally, I have found most of them not only willing to be "copied," but in some cases willing to assist me in my efforts at a life-like representation, and so in that way I have made some very staunch friends, as I have already indicated.

I cannot, however, claim to be an intimate friend of Mr. Beerbohm Tree, although he will allow me to say, I hope, that a "casual acquaintanceship" exists between us. I have had the pleasure of meeting him many times,

and I personally have enjoyed his company on each occasion. Whether Mr. Tree would say the same I cannot, of course, tell. My first meeting with him was at a certain noble lord's house on a Sunday evening many years ago. The company present was certainly a notable one; it included such names as Mr. Tree himself, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Mr. H. B. Irving and his wife, Miss Dorothea Baird, Sir Charles Wyndham, Miss Mary Moore, Mr. Haddon Chambers, Mr. Gilbert Farquhar, Mr. Comyns Carr, Lord Rosslyn, and many others. Mr. Haddon Chambers was very anxious for me to give an imitation of Mr. Tree, and the others pressed forward his suggestion. But I was somewhat nervous about attempting it. Anyway, as I had once played in *Captain Swift*, it was not difficult to learn a few lines written on scraps of paper by the author of that play himself. I remember both Mr. Farquhar and Mr. Chambers standing guard over Mr. Tree as he sat in his chair, in order that he might not escape during my "taking him off." I still live to tell the tale. Some little while after I had finished, Mr. Tree and I sat on the stairs and talked of art. He was full,

then, of his coming production of *Herod*. So all seemed well.

Another night Mr. Tree was presented with the gold badge of hon.-membership of the Bons Frères Club at one of its meetings. After making his speech, he heard I was to be put up next to help entertain the company, and he promptly decamped. I wondered if I had offended him, and wrote him to that effect. Here is a portion of his reply—

"December 7, 1899.

"DEAR MR. WILLIAMS,

"I was delighted to get your letter. . . . I only left the other evening at the psychological moment because I am always rather nervous about seeing myself imitated, lest I should lose that self-conceit which is so necessary to one's aplomb in working. But I know that your imitation is not only artistic but kindly. I am greatly pleased that you were impressed with 'King John.'

"Yours very truly,

"HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE."

On another occasion, when I and my wife

were seated in the stalls at the Tivoli (Busman's Holiday), Harry Lauder was due to appear, but something had detained him elsewhere. The management approached me and asked me to help them out of their difficulty. Without any preparation I walked upon the stage in jacket suit and no make-up. I had not then been on the Tivoli stage for three years. I recited and gave a few imitations. During the show I reminded the audience that as a rule the mimic announced that he or she would give an imitation of Mr. So-and-So. I begged to give them an imitation and leave them to judge who it was. I then gave an imitation of Mr. Beerbohm Tree, who happened to be present, and he laughed so loudly that the audience recognized my imitation and the original at the same time. The applause and effect are better imagined than described.

I have always been deeply interested in Mr. Tree and all his work, as he is undoubtedly the hardest worked actor-manager we have to-day. He is like myself, restless, and always wanting change; and he gets it. I remember once having a real "Tree" day. I saw him at a matinee of, I believe, *Peril*, and in the

evening I saw him as Hamlet; two parts more dissimilar it would be difficult to imagine. I have always, of course, been interested in his Dickens productions—his Fagin and John Jasper. I think the latter play, *Edwin Drood*, was far too poor for his ability, and too weak a play for success—as it proved. There was not enough Dickens in the idea for Dickensians, and not enough idea in the play for the general playgoer. But it will be ever memorable to the students of the drama for the wonderful study of Grewgious, by Mr. William Haviland.

Up to the present, Mr. Tree has been offered huge sums for a turn on a music-hall stage; but the bait has not tempted him. Perhaps his strong views on the "sketch" question stand in the way. No words from me can give any idea of Mr. Tree's great work, and his wonderful versatility. I merely mention him as a great man whom I have met, and am proud to have even the slightest acquaintanceship with so distinguished a thinker and an artist.

I cannot claim the slightest acquaintance with his clever brother, Mr. Max Beerbohm; but I remember once at a dinner making a

caricature sketch of the famous caricaturist himself. It caused a great amount of fun, but who "collared" the sketch I have never yet discovered. I thought at the time that perhaps he had himself; but I can hardly flatter myself that my poor efforts would have interested him sufficiently. Speaking of Mr. Max Beerbohm, one is reminded immediately of the many smart stories of him that are current, and if I attempted to even relate those I know it would take up much of my poor book. But one is uppermost in my mind, and I feel I must give it. There was a series of articles—I think called "Great Men's Brothers"—appearing in some paper. Mr. Beerbohm Tree was casually mentioned as the brother of Mr. Max Beerbohm—I think by Mr. Max Beerbohm himself.

I am not sure, but I think I was first introduced to Mr. George Alexander by J. L. Toole. I remember my first imitation of him was as a character in *Sunlight and Shadow*, one of the first pieces he played at the old Avenue Theatre on the Embankment, now rebuilt and called "The Playhouse." Mr. Alexander played the crippled organist, and

very beautiful he was, and so was the play—a lovely and clean and healthy piece. It had a very small cast, which included Mr. George Alexander, Mr. Ben Webster, Mr. Yorke Stephens, Mr. Nutcombe Gould, and Mr. Alfred Hollis; Miss Marion Terry, Miss Maud Millett, and Miss Ada Neilson. I have seen Mr. Alexander in most of his plays ever since.

It was a gala night, on this particular occasion, at the Bon Frères Club, of which I am an honorary member. Mr. George Alexander was the guest of the evening. Only those who knew the fine old nights at the Bon Frères can imagine the star concerts held there. Well, I was called up, as usual, to assist in the programme, and many little messages to "have a go" at Alexander were handed to me. I gave several imitations, and then I drew from my pocket several dinner menus, on which I had scribbled all the names of the plays produced or played in by Alexander, and made the following speech:—

"Ladies and Gentlemen,—*The Idler* was sitting in *The Garden of Lies*, dreaming in

the *Sunlight and Shadow*. He dreamed that *Guy Domville*, accompanied by *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, spent *Saturday to Monday* in *Old Heidelberg*, where they were introduced to *The Prisoner of Zenda*, who had been discovered making a *Struggle for Life* in *The Wilderness* by the *Masqueraders*. It was the old story, *London Day by Day*. So we sent *Dr. Bill* as the *Ambassador* to *Old Crimea*, who was reading of the *Triumph of the Philistines* over *Paola and Francesca*, who had been drawn into the scandal by the *Princess and the Butterfly*, who found *Lady Windermere's Fan* had been left by the *Man of Forty* who had been *Searching for His Double, John Chilcote*. I suppose it seems *Much Ado About Nothing*, but this being *Liberty Hall*, you will forgive me using my own initials, *G.A.G.S.* But after reading of the *Revivals* of *Torrey and Alexander*, I see the *Importance of being Earnest* in my own *Revivals*, but am having a *Night Off* first. But what this has to do with Bransby Williams, Heaven only knows! But, *As You Like it*, I forgive him, and tell you, Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen, that *If I Were King*, I would knight all Bons Frères

and give Bransby Williams the Order of the Boot."

This caused much amusement, and no one enjoyed it more than G. A. himself.

One day, in Brighton, he introduced me to Mr. Stephen Phillips, and we were strolling along together when Mr. Alexander went into the post-office to make a purchase. As he moved away from the counter, and whilst the clerk, in the usual way, was bending over his writing, I repeated Alexander's order in his voice. The clerk, without looking up, said, "You've got what you asked for"!

I have always a soft corner in my heart for George Alexander as an actor and as a manager. My first impressions of him were obtained when he was acting in *Sunlight and Shadow*, already mentioned. I have met him many times since, and as an actor-manager I think him most unselfish. Think of the ordinary "walking gentleman" parts he has undertaken, instead of a *rôle* which would allow him to be always "on and in the limelight."

He is a keen business man, and possesses the business acumen lacking in many a "star"

actor. He knows himself how to manage and present his wares to the public; hence his long list of successes. The last kind thing I can record of him is that he wired me on Christmas Eve last year, my first night in the pantomime of *Aladdin* at the Prince's Theatre, Bristol, in which I played "Abanazar," introducing a series of imitations. "All good wishes for success," his message said. "Please keep my memory green with your splendid imitations—George Alexander."

In speaking of Forbes Robertson, one cannot but think of his wonderful "Hamlet." I suppose no other than Irving's has been talked of more. What a charming personality he has—and what a voice!

I have mentioned elsewhere how he came to see a small performance of mine at a working men's club in Paddington. After that, I was anxious to give an imitation of him in the character he was playing in *For the Crown*. I had not seen the play in town, but hearing that there was to be a matinée of it in Brighton, I wired asking him to keep me a seat. I saw the play, and singled out the lines I wanted, of which Forbes Robertson

afterwards gave me a fair copy—an act which showed not only his approval but his good nature. At the time I expressed my opinion of what a distinguished Hamlet he would make. He smiled, as much as to say, "I intend to try," but actually said, "Oh yes; but every one plays Hamlet."

I got back to town in time that night to give my imitation. The last occasion on which I met him was when I went to see his beautiful performance of "The Stranger" in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. I was anxious to have a chat with him, and he sent round and expressed a wish that I should visit him in his room after one of the acts. I was deeply impressed, as were others that night, with his performance. It really seemed almost spiritual and saintly—I can imagine no other actor on the English stage attempting this same part, let alone succeeding in it.

Having been so affected by the whole play, and more particularly with his inspiring performance, I approached his room with something of awe. But this feeling soon left me, and we quickly got into conversation. Any one who has witnessed this play will remember

how the characters all seem to have known "The Stranger" many years ago. This phrase is often repeated. During our short talk Forbes Robertson suddenly said, "It seems many years ago since I first met you." I don't think he noticed the remark as I did, but sitting there in his make-up as "The Stranger," and saying these words to me in that mellifluous voice, made me go quite cold. Long may this great-souled actor flourish and such plays as this succeed.

I have met Sir Charles Wyndham many times, and have always been struck by his real good humour and kindness. I have never detected in him the "sidey" man such as one meets often among "stars." He has always a kind word for everybody, and is always a fair and honest manager. I have heard men who have played with him enlarge upon the subject of how good and easy it is to work with him. "Let every one have a chance," seems to be his motto, and he acts up to it. He has always been very considerate to me, and when I have wanted to imitate him no obstacle has been put in the way. He even went to the trouble of having his last act

in *David Garrick* typed for my use. Recently, at an Eccentric Club dinner at the Hotel Cecil, he was in the chair and made one of his charming speeches. Later in the evening I was turned on to do some imitations, and quietly facing him, I repeated some of the best points of his speech in his voice. There was a moment's pause, and all turned to look at the chairman to see how he would take it. He very soon led the applause himself, and in a few words congratulated me. He also was good enough to wire me on my first night in pantomime, saying, "Every good wish for Christmas and success to-night, though I understand you are cutting the ground from under my feet—Charles Wyndham."

CHAPTER XVII

SOME MUSIC-HALL MAGNATES

When one thinks of the music hall of to-day and compares it with that of only a few years ago, one can realize what great forward strides have been made during that period. I am only a young man, yet I have seen some remarkable changes during the last twelve years. To many old performers and managers who can remember the very old days, the music hall of to-day, if they think of it at all, must fill them with thoughts of wonderment, so altered for good is everything now.

In the old style of entertainment refreshment played a great part. I do not mean it formed part of the entertainment, but a part—and a great part, too—of the revenue to the proprietors. Tables were set all over the floor, with a special one at the top of the hall where the chairman sat as imposing as

a king, surrounded by many young bloods who had fought to be near the great man. He was resplendent in evening dress, diamond studs and rings, with "'is 'ammer in 'is 'and," and was the envy of all. This great man tapped the table with his hammer for silence when he wanted to announce each artiste, and he also rat-tat-tatted as the signal for applause.

I only once appeared at a music hall of this calibre, and that was during the last week of the old "Bedford" in Camden Town. I "starred" the top of the bill, and Herbert Campbell the bottom. I well remember that the scene of the death of Little Nell was punctuated by calls of "Orders, gents!" "Sandwich," "Bottled Beer," "Any orders, gents," and so on.

Gradually these drinking entertainments have changed, and to-day we have beautiful palaces, some far surpassing the ordinary theatres in construction, decoration, comfort and cheapness. In the Moss & Stoll "Empires" in the country, for instance, one can be seated in a comfortable armchair in a beautifully decorated and well-lighted palace for one shilling.

The name of the music-hall magnate, Mr. Oswald Stoll, sets one thinking. He is still a young man, yet what wonders he has worked! Oswald Stoll's father kept, I believe, the old Parthenon Music Hall in Liverpool; and it is curious to note that he and his wife engaged Dan Leno's father and mother and young Dan himself to play their sketch, which included a great dancing "turn" by Dan, for £5 a week. Oswald Stoll has since paid Dan Leno himself more than £200 a week. This same Oswald Stoll was a lad in his father's employ at Liverpool, and as a quiet, observant youth was taking everything in, as it were, to improve upon in the future. Fired with ambition, and, above all, determination, and being, withal, a far-seeing youth, it was not long before he made a start for himself by taking a hall at Cardiff in conjunction with one or two others, who worked loyally with him. They, I believe, painted their own bills, and started fairly well. It was not long before he began to make a little profit on his capital.

It would be a long story, and I should have to write a book entitled "The Achievements

of Oswald Stoll," if I attempted a review of Mr. Stoll's life. Suffice it to say, he went on improving and was soon able to take the Philharmonic Hall, and put a padlock on the door and prevent a rival coming into the town. Success attended his every turn, but he was not dogged by what some people call "luck." It was by studying every turn of the wheel that eventually brought him the success he merited. After succeeding at Cardiff and erecting a better hall there, he thought it would be wiser for him to secure talent for more than a week at a time. So he went to Newport and Swansea, and thus commenced a circuit. He now became a larger employer of talent. He was not only a manager, he was a student of Herbert Spencer in his spare time, to say nothing of being a writer of songs. Few remember or know that he wrote Vesta Tilley's popular song, "Oh, you girls, you naughty young girls!" He was also an artistes' agent.

The latter part of his history is better known. He formed a company and went on building music halls throughout the country, and later on joined forces with what was then

the Moss and Thornton tour, which included Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford. Thus began the famous Moss Empire, Ltd. Mr. Stoll yet had his eye on London, and built suburban palaces at Hackney, Stratford, Shepherd's Bush, and New Cross. As every one knows now, it is the greatest combine of halls, with a capital of over two millions of money. Others may have run two shows nightly, but it was Mr. Oswald Stoll who popularized it; and now to-day there is hardly a town with a "*once* nightly" entertainment. He came—he saw—he conquered—and is now the biggest buyer of talent in the country.

His mother has always been heart and soul with him in all he has done; and for each hall she has stipulated on the opening night she should take the money at the pit door, and this she has done. Each has been a success, except the first Coliseum Company. But the present Coliseum Company is by no means a failure, considering the dividend as I write is declared 20 per cent., and the genial lady occupies a seat in a pay-box most nights to keep herself still interested in her clever son's great work.

Oswald Stoll is, and always has been, a man of very few words. An illustration of this trait is worth recalling. Very early in his career at the Parthenon Music Hall, Liverpool, he engaged a double cross-talk comedian act from London. When the two performers appeared, they were not considered up to the level of what was expected, and did not capture the cheers of the audience. Young Stoll immediately changed the order of their turn, giving them about second place in the second house. This naturally hurt their feelings. Hearing that the manager was only a youth, they thought they might "bluff" him with their own importance, and so get their turn adjusted on the programme to their liking. So they set out to find him, and discovered him quietly seated in the pay-box, counting over the money. The following scene took place :—

Comedians. Hi! say! are you Oswald Stoll?

Stoll. Yes.

Com. Do you know who we are?

Stoll. Yes.

Com. Do you know our turns have been changed?

Stoll. Yes.

Com. Who changed it?

Stoll. *I did.*

Com. You don't seem to know who we are, my lad! We are So-and-So, from London.

Stoll. Yes!

Com. And does the turn stay as it is?

Stoll. Yes.

Com. You don't have much to say.

Stoll. No.

Com. Can't you say anything else?

Stoll. Oh yes!

Com. Well, let's hear from you.

Stoll. (Very quietly) Good night.

That is a story of his very early career. Here is another, of more recent date.

A certain well-known light comedian, who is also author and manager, offered Oswald Stoll the man who was tried for the Camden Town murder as an attraction for his Empires. He suggested a sensational court scene in which the acquitted man should be the chief character and interest. Mr. Stoll quietly looked at the messenger from the aforesaid gentleman, and quietly thanked him for his

offer, ending with something to the effect that if the idea was so good and likely to be such a great attraction, he wondered why it was not used by himself at his own theatre, instead of being so generous to him. He was not cognizant of the fact that music-hall audiences were in want of such a turn. It may be remembered that after all a certain manager did engage Wood, but that he never appeared.

The most recent story of Mr. Stoll is in connection with the disappearance of Miss Violet Charlesworth, when her dogs and other belongings were being sold. A certain agent thought Mr. Stoll would jump at the idea and buy one of the fine dogs, and use the animal in some way at the Coliseum, and so wired him: "Can get the finest dog of Miss Charlesworth—sure attraction—how much will you give?" Mr. Stoll replied—

"NOTHING."

When Sir Edward Moss retired as acting chairman, Mr. Stoll was left practically the first man in the music-hall world.

Speaking of Sir Edward Moss, who with Richard Thornton founded the Moss tour, we

come to another man who started from the bottom rung of the ladder. He, I believe, used to play the piano at little "Sing-songs" in his very early days. One of his first ventures was in Edinburgh, and Richard Thornton, I think, began in Sunderland. Thornton was a violinist, and played anywhere and everywhere. He used to fiddle in a very small way in some of the smaller Tyneside towns. It was in Sunderland that Thornton engaged a young man from the local post-office to come in during his spare time to do the writing of letters, etc., necessary for arranging for artistes' appearances. In course of time this young post-office clerk became part and parcel of the business, and gradually rose with his governor, and, as the concern grew, he became general manager. That man to-day is Mr. Frank Allen, who for years managed the Moss tour, and is now in active business at their head office.

Richard Thornton's name has disappeared, but he still sticks to the Tyneside, and to-day looks after the interests of Newcastle and Sunderland. He is a great character, but has never aimed at "swelldom," preferring to live

in a wooden Norwegian châlet at Gosforth. He occupies his time as a blacksmith, a motorist, and he also invented a new light that is being extensively used in the North.

Sir Edward Moss is a country squire and a Justice of the Peace, and takes things easily, enjoying himself and seeing the world; while, on the other hand, Mr. Oswald Stoll is always "at it"—always at ways and means and working up a gigantic system to keep all the halls going like a clock. Before he had quite so many halls to look after, he used to live in Cardiff, and there he made every engagement and personally pulled the strings from his office, even to arranging programmes, etc. In some spare moments, during train journeys and elsewhere, he managed to write a book entitled, "Grand Survival: Theory of Immortality by Natural Law. Founded upon a Variation of Herbert Spencer's Definition of Evolution." He is very quiet, and when one thinks he is listless and not at all interested, he is taking in every point, for he is a good listener.

Once a well-known comedian, interviewing him about a re-engagement, said he wanted

more money. Mr. Stoll asked quietly, "Why?" The comedian said he had made a success. Stoll replied, "Oh yes, of course. But I didn't engage you to make a failure." Another time, I was negotiating for the production of a sketch for which I thought I ought to receive so much more. He sent me a letter, dividing the requested money into so many at the price of his gallery, and asked me if I thought I should draw that number extra in that particular part of the building. Another time, I disagreed with him over a little business transaction. He, in a long letter, replied that he was not surprised at my not seeing the matter in his light, but assured me "there was more wisdom in heaven and earth than was dreamt of in the philosophy of Bransby Williams."

I think Oswald Stoll's success is due to personal superintendence, and by not living merely for the present day. He always has his business eyeglass looking ahead, planning for and against all contingencies.

Another great London music-hall magnate was George Adney Payne. He started in a very humble capacity at Greenwich, and

worked his way up, becoming part lessee of Lusby's Music Hall, now the Paragon, in Mile End Road. Later, he joined the Canterbury, then became managing director of the Tivoli, Oxford, Pavilion, etc., and began the formation of what is now termed the Syndicate Halls.

Those were the days when artistes used to have three, four, and six months' engagements at each hall. Now some only get six nights. Of course, previous to the time I am speaking of, such men as T. W. Barrett, G. H. Macdermott, and others, had as long as eighteen months' and two years' engagements at the old London Pavilion, playing every night in the year. In those days, men who were "stars" were able to sing six and seven songs at each performance; but since the "twice nightly" system and the existence of such a great number of halls, many artists could not sing more than two songs if they tried.

This system of such short shows has bred a generation of performers fifty per cent. of whom cannot entertain for a third of the time of the old performers.

Reverting to the managerial side, of course

it would not be advisable here to go into the details of all the managers of to-day. But among the old ones stands out the Grand Old Man, Charles Morton, whose life has been so well told by my old friend, H. Chance Newton.

Another popular man in those days was Herbert Sprake, who owned Collins's Music Hall at Islington. Here there used to congregate many of the stars on their way home at night. Most prominent among these was Herbert Campbell, who used to call in for his "cup o' tea." Harry Randall was another Collins boy. Sprake used to run a good clean show, and it was always a clean and cosy family rendezvous; it was nicknamed "The Chapel on the Green."

At the present moment we have Thomas Barrasford, who runs a tour of music halls in the provinces in opposition to the Stoll tour. He also has a fine place in Paris, and is arranging at the time of writing several other continental places. He, I believe, started as a ship's riveter and painter on the Clyde.

Then there is Walter de Freece, husband of that great artiste, Vesta Tilley. He is the

son of the De Freece who ran the first "Two-house a night" show in Liverpool, and I believe Walter was then the "call boy." At the time he was a comrade of the other boy, Oswald Stoll. He now runs a group of music halls, and manages to look after his clever wife's business at the same time.

A certain manager of the old times, whose family are still very busy in the profession, was well known for keeping expenses down, as well as for paying a star well. The usual thing with all managers was, and is, as a rule, to get some one small and cheap for first and last turns. This manager one night was lamenting the fact that he had to pay them at all—so blurted out: "D—n, I won't never have no *first* or *last* turn in my bill any more!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME MUSIC-HALL STARS

The music halls have seen some clever men and women "stars," all of whom have worked their way up from the very bottom. Take Charles Godfrey—he was a genius, in his way. He could sing any kind of song, and his pathos was great. Years before he was known as Charles Godfrey he was a general utility man in a stock company, and looked upon as "no good." He was known as Charles Lacey then. Years afterwards, he walked into the Prince's restaurant when a number of actors were present. "Well, Lacey, my boy," said one of these, "where have you come from, and what are you doing? You look quite a swell." "Yes, old boy," he quietly remarked; "I'm known to the world now as Charles Godfrey." Godfrey was at that time about the biggest "star" in music halls, among the men.

Miss Marie Lloyd commenced as a little girl at the Sebright Music Hall in Hackney Road, London, and having commenced so young, people put her down as old now. She is still young, however, at the time of writing, being not yet forty.

Miss Ada Reeve, another clever lady, has been on the halls for years. I remember her playing in pantomime at the Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel Road, London. She roughed it, and once as a girl was doing an *al fresco* show —I think it was at Margate—when a man gave her a sovereign and told her she would some day do well. The man was Charles Godfrey.

Eugene Stratton, an artiste to his finger-tips, worked in a very humble capacity in America for years. He was later known as the famous corner man of Moore and Burgess's Minstrels, and sang "The Whistling Coon" for some three thousand nights.

R. G. Knowles, another star, played for years in America as actor and nigger, and came to London and started at the Trocadero at a very small salary. It took him a long time to get the public with him, but he did

it at last—and no wonder, with his breezy personality. Knowles is a real clever business man in addition to having such wonderful ability as an entertainer. Above all, he is a real good friend. I have known him do the very kindest of actions for poor brothers and sisters. He is a very blunt and brusque man. Some one once said to him, "Is it true that you only got ten dollars a week in New York?" Knowles asked him who told him this. "Oh, so-and-so," came the reply. "Well," said Knowles, "why didn't you come to me—I could have told you the truth. I only got *five!*"

What a favourite Vesta Tilley is! There is not another woman on the stage who wields such a charm over so many thousands in the great towns of England, and who proves such a great drawing power wherever she goes. She started at the bottom of the ladder, too. When very young, at the time the halls were as I described them, and even poorer in the provinces, she travelled with her father and, I am told, played "Poor Jo" in many towns. Once or twice her rival in the part at the opposition concert hall in the town was the present

popular cockney comedian and sportsman, Joe Elvin.

Few people now can imagine Joe ever having played this part. His father, once popular as Joe Keegan, was Bucket, and many funny stories could be told of these two, father and son, in their travels. Once Joe was playing the part. He was only a boy, and they had been at some small hall in the North. They carried a small back cloth with a tissue moon in the back, and when the time came for "Jo" to die, a waiter had been told off during the week to stand on a chair with a lighted candle behind the moon, just for the few moments' effect. On the Saturday night, business was pretty brisk and the said waiter was busy, and a little inebriated also. The time arrived, and with several grunts and growls the waiter assumed his position, much against his will, and "wobbled" the moon very much indeed. Meanwhile, Jo was laid out, saying, "I am a-moving on," etc., and repeating the Lord's Prayer after old Keegan, who had a very deep bass voice. Suddenly the moon wobbled more than ever, and Keegan, in the tone of his part, said, "Keep that blighted moon still!" That

settled the waiter, who was in anything but a good humour and just tired of his job. He jerked the candle through the moon and burned it, and in a fearful temper said aloud, as "Jo" died, "Coom heer and light yer own damned moon!" You can imagine there were no tears shed at the death of "Jo" that night, save those of laughter.

Joe Elvin has often told me stories of his early days. One is always funny to me. He and his father and a ballad vocalist were to appear at the Theatre Royal, Widnes. Young Joe was as proud as a peacock. He was at last to appear in a real theatre! He described their arrival, and how he at last saw this so-called theatre. It was a huge old tent with cinder floor, where they dug out a hole in front of the stage for the orchestra to sit in. He now calls it the Theatre Rag and Stick. At night it poured with rain, and the wet came trickling through a hole in the tent over the stage. The ballad vocalist, a fairly stout lady, walked on to sing, "Come back to Erin," and old Joe Keegan calmly stood by her side, as serious as possible, holding an old umbrella over her, and as she moved, so did he, to

shrieks of laughter from the boys and girls of the audience.

George Robey, with numbers of successes to his name, is one of the most popular pantomime comedians in the country. He had his first chance as a comic subject to Kennedy, the famous mesmerist at the old Aquarium, London. It is difficult to imagine him to-day as the singer of "My hat's a brown 'un," with which he first became popular at the Oxford.

Wilkie Bard, the most recent of our comic stars to become famous, I remember as a quiet, anxious ambitious youth at a big smoking concert, waiting to go on and get a chance. He was dressed as a coster, and sang a song about "Our Amateur Dramatic Club," and "If it wasn't for the likes of Beerbohm Tree." That youth was the now popular Wilkie Bard—a droll comedian, and a good friend.

Little Tich, famous all the world over, started as an attraction behind a bar, I believe, in Greenwich. I first saw him play the Pumpkin in *Cinderella* at the Pavilion, Mile End. Tich is an artist, a fine whistler, and a beautiful 'cello player.

Then there are favourites such as Chirgwin,

who has sung "The Blind Boy" for thirty years, which song is still called for.

James Fawn, I think, is even to-day the finest comic singer on the stage. He was an actor of the old school before he became a comic singer and pantomime comedian. Many remember him doing a double turn with that wonderful man, Arthur Roberts. London once was singing one song everywhere—James Fawn's song, "If you want to know the time, ask a Policeman."

It would take a book to tell of Arthur Roberts alone. He has hovered between theatres and music halls for years, and has been successful in each for at least thirty years. One of the most versatile and talented men that ever walked the stage. What stories one can tell of Arthur! Once at the Strand Theatre he had been on the spree and was very late indeed. He persuaded the manager to go on and say he had had an accident and had broken his arm, but would do his best. Arthur came on as demure as possible, with his arm in a sling, and had an enormous reception. It was not long before he forgot the sling, and the audience roared.

Then there is the star of the present day, Harry Lauder, the famous Scotch comedian. He made his first West End appearance at the Tivoli, deputizing for some one, I forget whom. I know that I followed his turn with my "Barnaby Rudge" characters, and that his song "Tobermory" (a word so recently figuring in the newspapers) caught on at once. No man has ever leaped into public favour and such a position and such a salary so quickly; and yet Harry Lauder had toured the country for years, and had not been even noticed.

All the billing and starring and puffing in the world by managers does not make a star. It may make a "stir" for a time, but unless the artiste has ability, and, above all, personality, it does not continue. The music-hall profession to-day has thousands of names of artistes, say the managers, but how few can be called stars, or regular attractions! With the growth of halls, managers have had to rely upon sketches, and many stars that "come and go," and leave not a trace behind. Names! Names! cry the managers; and so to-day we find "star" actors and

actresses on the music-hall stage who a few years ago would have thought it a terrible act. What a change, when you think of it! Now we have Lewis Waller, who has appeared on the halls—the most virile of leading men to-day, with all the romantic charm, presence, and voice requisite to the leading man. Lionel Brough—dear old Uncle Lal—Mrs. Beerbohm Tree, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Bourchier, Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Hicks, Madame Albani, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Irving, Herbert Sleath and his wife, Ellis Jeffreys, and numerous others. Just think of the change! And managers are always looking for attractions, although some say, "Oh, stars! We don't want stars—only a good all-round bill!" Ye gods; look what their audiences would be without the stars! Take an example. When Maud Allan had become *the* star at the Palace, what happened when she was indisposed? A pitiful array of half-empty seats. And yet there was a fine programme to be seen without her.

In my opinion, an artiste has not the chance of becoming so popular now as in the old days. "Stars" were made and became

household words, when they remained a month or six or eight weeks at a hall. But now a new man or a woman comes along for six nights, and is gone before the public knows or knew they were there, or were worth seeing. So the changes have worked from the semi-drinking saloon to fine palaces with every comfort, and at a third the price of the old shows. All honour to the pioneers of Palaces and People's Popular and Pure Amusement. Undoubtedly the names of Mr. Oswald Stoll and Sir Edward Moss must stand out and be acknowledged and honoured for their work, which has not only bettered the public, but the profession too; and if at the same time their pockets are the better for it, they deserve all they get.

Before I close this chapter, let me tell a story of "one of the old Brigade." During one of my earliest engagements at the Tivoli Theatre, Manchester, I met a rare old "character," Jim Pymer. He had been almost anything—in fact, I think he had done everything. I remember his pompous old-fashioned manner. He seemed to me to have a supreme

contempt for the new generation of music-hall performers, actors, and circus artistes. He was a great friend of the late W. F. Wallet, called the Queen's Jester, and was always telling stories about him. I was "starring" in a northern city, and he was told about me, and when I came in at night he used to give me a most penetrating glance. I got into conversation with him on one occasion, and found him a very interesting old chap. He had seen and heard Dickens give his readings in several towns. He had been actor in Shakespeare and clown in the circus the same night. He used to boast that he never went in from the box office to see a turn. I cannot quite remember what influence was brought to bear on him, but rather think it was my youth and enthusiasm that decided him, but he came in, and the manager, in his surprise, put him in a private box—and there he sat.

I worked to him with all my might. He commenced to applaud, and I thought "What a victory!" Then I came to my finishing character, the "Old Grandfather" from "The Old Curiosity Shop." I felt my show that

night, and gradually the old man gave way and concluded by crying. When I took my final call, the old chap was wiping his eyes with an old red handkerchief; he then came round to the back, and so affected was he that he could scarcely speak. He took my hand and murmured, "God bless you, my boy!" and disappeared. It was the topic of conversation —old Jim Pymer had seen a performance! I became very intimate with the old man, sympathizing with him in his loneliness and laughing at him in his grim, bombastic, but, after all, innocent, conceit.

I paid a return visit, and found the old chap very broken and very ill. He was to be given a benefit, and many were going to assist him for old times' sake, and out of respect for him. I promised I would come up from London to do him a turn, returning to town for my night work. This offer affected him very deeply, and so it was arranged. Alas! it was not to be—the poor old man died quietly, and the curtain had been rung down on his last scene in life.

The subject of getting into a theatre on one's professional card came up one day, and

I said I had left my cards behind. I was asked my name, and told them "B. W., etc.," working so-and-so, etc. Old Pymer said, "My boy, I never waste words—I give them my card, and if they don't want to let me in, I bow myself out with as much dignity as my status will allow." With this, the old man handed me the following card, which I reproduce here to show, as I have said, that there was little he had *not* done. I think the final line *re* the admission is really funny.

JIM PYMER.

Comedian, Glee Singer, Comic Singer, Patter Vocalist, Shakespearean Jester, Clown and Comic Singer, Author, Agent in Advance, Ring Master, Stage Master, Ballet Master, Chairman, Lecturer, Foreman of Bill Posters, Bill Inspector, Licensee and Manager, Licensed Victualler, Treasurer, Petty Cash Manipulator, and now at the Tivoli Theatre of Varieties, Peter Street, Manchester. Will you kindly pass me to see the Entertainment?

Yours respectfully,
JIM PYMER.

He was one of the "Old Brigade."

CHAPTER XIX

PANTOMIMES

HAVING played many parts during my career, from "Nigger Minstrel" upwards, it is only natural that pantomimes should be included in my repertoire. The first pantomime I appeared in was a small affair, a burlesque, one of H. J. Byron's famous pieces, too, viz. *Aladdin*. In this I appeared as the Grand Vizier and played it as a dwarf. I was brought on each time by the Emperor, and was supposed to be suspended by an elastic. Those were the days of hard work and ambition, and I did work then that was quite unnecessary, but it pleased me, nevertheless.

After having been a serious actor for so many years, it came as a surprise to many professional friends—and to my public friends too—when it was announced I would "star"

as the Bold Bad Baron in a pantomime. I was rather keen on the idea; and when at last Herbert Blackmore, the famous dramatic agent, came along with an offer, everything was soon settled for me to appear at the Shakespeare Theatre, Liverpool, in the *Babes in the Wood.* As the time grew near I became nervous and cognizant of the fact that it would not be so easy as it had at first appeared. Yet, despite all this, and the many anxieties—I confess in a way I made them for myself—all went well.

When the rehearsals commenced I found the old experienced hands not worrying in the least. I had much to learn, and soon saw how easy it was for many a clever comedian to go in pantomime and fail, and yet another man be almost a failure as a single turn, but a big success in pantomime. Take James Welch, for instance, one of the finest comedians and character actors, and look at his short life at Drury Lane, which lasted, I believe, only a few nights. The pantomime I was to play in was written by that famous pantomime writer, J. Hickory Wood. I found that one had not to look for a part from the author so much

as the skeleton or hooks on which to hang one's own specialities.

It was then I found that the comedians thought of all the funny jokes or "gags" they had seen or heard, and then introduced them into their parts, provided they had not been used there too recently. Not having a "gag" book I had to think how to adapt a scene suitable for my particular line of business, and at last hit upon the idea of an old man pursuing the girl to make love to her, and in order to do so taking lessons "under the Beerbohm Tree." Then I changed from George Alexander to Beerbohm Tree and Sir Charles Wyndham and Martin Harvey. This scene was my salvation in pantomime the first year, and has been used successfully by me each year since, by merely bringing it up to date.

The first year I made up as Beerbohm Tree in "Last of the Dandies," the second year as "Svengali," and this last year at Bristol as "Mephistopheles." Now again, in accordance with desire of the public and management, I have gone back to "Svengali." In my first year, as I have stated, I played the Bad

Baron, the Wicked Uncle of *Babes in the Wood*. This pantomime had a fine all-round company. The Robbers were played by the Brothers Egbert, a clever couple of a clever family. They were children in the business, then in circuses, and under Lord George Sanger. They are known now as the "Happy Dustmen," and their catch-phrase is "Hurry up, Walter." They are fine funny boys to work with, and have a big fund of "gags." In fact, who in the circus business has not? I think some of the best "gags" and bits of business to-day in pantomimes were first done in circuses or as stump speeches by the old Nigger Minstrel. Then there was George Baston, famous for his old countrymen studies, and the popular "Galloping Major." There was Harry Lupino, of the famous Lupino family, and his boy—then a little chap called "Nipper Lupino"—who played the Boy Babe, and very fine he was. The Girl Babe was played by Miss Maidie Andrews. Maid Marion was the daughter of the famous Maude Branscombe, Miss Gertie Branscombe. Robin Hood was played by that fine dashing artiste and sweet-

voiced vocalist, Miss Winifred Hare. The whole pantomime was an enormous success and ran over thirteen weeks.

I learned a lot in my first panto. and made many friends, and considerably more in the second. I was engaged to play "Fitzwarren" in *Dick Whittington* at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, and I had profited by my experience and arranged set pieces of humour or gag to introduce into my part. The other members of the company were very clever in their particular lines, which unfortunately did not blend with my style, with the result that I was alone—that is to say, I had no one working with or to me. In pantomime a great artiste is assisted and scores from another who works with him or her the whole time; as an instance, Dan Leno was always scoring off Herbert Campbell. Campbell was what we call a good "feeder." A more recent instance is Dan Rolyat and John Humphreys. These two always work together, and the result is remarkable.

The winter just past I was playing Abanazar in *Aladdin* at Prince's Theatre, Bristol, under the management of James

Macready Chute, a very famous manager, and son of a famous father. Well known and respected throughout the entire profession, he is one of the kindest and most tactful managers I have ever met. This was most noticeable during the heavy rehearsals, when never once did he "drive" any of us, but "led" us just where he wanted, with the result that he had managed to get the best out of his entire company. He always has an excellent staff, the members of which seem to live and die in the "Chute" service, and when they are really too old to work are pensioned. It is a great family party, and I am proud to have been associated with it and the town of Bristol. It was quite a different kind of pantomime from what Londoners are in the habit of seeing. It had a *story*, and at times was very dramatic—the cave scene, for instance. When *Aladdin* was shut in he was offered Fame, Pleasure, Gold, etc., and refused each, choosing Love. This was played in an intensely dramatic manner by the *Aladdin*, who was the youngest principal boy in the country, Miss Ouida Macdermott, the daughter of the famous G. H. Macdermott, who has all the

Photos. by] [*Lewis R. Protheroe, Bristol.*

ABANAZAR. PENNY SHOWMAN. THE DUTCHMAN.

DISGUISES USED BY BRANSBY WILLIAMS IN "ALADDIN" AT BRISTOL, 1908-9.

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heredity cleverness. She is dramatic and good in her comedy; she is equally at home in a ballad of the Clara Butt style, or in singing a coon song and executing a fine characteristic dance. She has the makings of a really fine actress, and, in my opinion, would make an ideal "Peter Pan." Time alone will tell.

Personally, I had eighteen changes of make-up as Abanazar, during his search for the lamp.

I wonder if the public realize how much work is necessary in placing a good first-class pantomime before them? A rough idea may be gathered from the following:—

The manager who is about to produce—he may be going to do one pantomime only, as in the case of Mr. Chute, of Bristol—first selects his subject, and thinks of the most likely people suitable to the parts and his audience. The artistes are generally selected during his run round the country seeing the pantomimes in each town. Sometimes an agent does this part. As an instance, Herbert Blackmore, the agent, sees sometimes one hundred pantomimes in one season, and makes notes *re* artistes, scenery, authors, etc.,

etc., and then, of course, he is useful to both the proprietors and the artistes, his clients. The manager has now settled his subject and his artistes, and gets his author to write to suit the company suggested. Then he next selects his scenic artistes, and starts the work of the year, getting his two big scenes as elaborate as possible. Dresses are designed by, say, Comelli or Alias, who are the two most prominent men to-day. There are, of course, hundreds of other little details, such as the make-ups, wigs, etc. We hurry on now. He selects his ballet mistress, and she arrives some weeks before the production and starts training what are called the "local girls," who will be in the *marches* and *groups*. The time now arrives when scenery, dresses, and stage lighting are all ready, Next the principals, playing parts, assemble about ten days before the production.

Introductions all round follow, for some may be perfect strangers. We begin; each one has his or her part, and starts in a room somewhere off the theatre. Each reads his part through; this goes on for a day or two, and any one listening would think it most

"unfunny" and an awful muddle. In a few days "slices" are cut out of it and new ideas, more suitable, put in. A comedian may spring a "gag" at rehearsal, which may be very old and what we call "whiskery" to us, but new to him. We all look askance and smack our hands, suggesting he is a naughty boy, or pull imaginary chin-whiskers, insinuating that it has *whiskers*.

After a few days we are taken on the stage, and begin to see the difference in everything after only rehearsing "words." Those having songs to sing are called, and they are set to work to learn the melodies. In a corner two comedians are comparing notes as to their respective bits of business. Perhaps the ladies will find their part small, while the comedians have it *all* to themselves. But the stage manager or producer, if he is tactful, adjusts all that. The days when women alone were able to carry pantomimes through are certainly gone. For there is a dearth of principal boys and girls who can act, sing, dance, and "gag," with the result that the pantomime has become the comedian's. Now we are doing only one scene, and that many times,

again and again. The rehearsals begin in the morning, with an hour's release during the day, and continue till the early hours of the next morning. It is this part of the real hard work and drudgery, and, above all, anxiety, the public do not realize. The artiste is anxious to succeed in his part, and the proprietor anxious to reap a profit from his tremendous outlay. Consequently the best result is aimed at by all concerned, and no effort is thought too much for the realization of such a consummation. Now for the first time we meet the chorus ladies and gentlemen, and afterwards the extras and supers. Then come the scenery and the dress rehearsal. Sometimes this latter begins about six o'clock in the evening and finishes at four or five next morning, and the public never dream that first night of the weariness, the headaches, and worn-out people who are fighting to win their approbation. It is the applause and cheers that spur them on to the last curtain. It's wonderful what the public can do. If it only encourages them it can make the artistes work wonders, and can as easily break their hearts. In the production at Bristol

last Christmas, as I have before stated, Mr Chute was all patience, and worked very hard indeed, as did his company. Then, when the dress rehearsal was finished, instead of a grumpy "That'll do," he stepped forward, and in a few kind words thanked everybody for their efforts, and was sure the result must be good if we all worked together. His few words worked wonders. They touched every one's heart and spurred all on to work for a man who acknowledged them. Fred Wyndham, under whom I worked for two years, was another kindly and tactful man. He knew just what he wanted, and got it done without "cursing." There are, of course, some producers who lose themselves and frighten the company into what they want; but I doubt if in the end they get as good a result.

The first night of the pantomime shows all the weak spots and unnecessary gags; and, as a rule, in the morning there is a call for "cuts," and from that moment it is a case of putting in only things that will go with a bang, whilst the slow "business" is gradually cut out. It is then only a question of the comedians playing with and to each other, but if they

are not friendly, it means failure for the pantomime. No two men have ever worked together so harmoniously and successfully as did Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell. Those who only see the pantomime from the front can have no idea of it as a business. It is a business of its own. Some men are most successful in pantomime, whilst others are lost in it. There is a well-known comedian, Mark Sheridan, who has played for some ten or twelve years with Fred Wyndham, and has never been in a failure. I believe he is engaged by the same firm for several years ahead, and is known as Wyndham's mascot.

The great wonder to me in pantomime is that in ten days artistes meet and rehearse and build up a four hours' entertainment. Yet in the production of a musical comedy they will be almost as many weeks.

Sometimes quite an accident or a slip will be the cause of a really funny "gag" or piece of business that will always be done in the pantomime afterwards. There are, of course, sometimes, accidents that cause a roar of laughter that are not meant to be at all funny. A big laugh, for instance, was

Photo. by] [*Lewis R. Protheroe, Bristol.*

BRANSBY WILLIAMS IN "ALADDIN" AT BRISTOL, 1908-9.

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caused when Dan Leno fell out of a balloon at Drury Lane—he was the only one who didn't laugh. Another laugh was when Wilkie Bard, I think, in Birmingham fell through a sort of skylight. The audience roared, and when Bard next appeared with his arm in a sling they laughed again. One man called out, "Never mind, Wilkie, keep it in." It produced a vociferous roar.

One night in the Bristol pantomime, Aladdin (Ouida Macdermott) had sprained her right arm, and in the scene where she had to strike me and knock me down, I was merrily "gagging" to the effect that I did not fear Aladdin that night because he was one-armed. I quite forgot she was *left*-handed, and *she* forgot it was play, and landed me a "slinger" on the ear, with the result that I went down flat as a flounder. Loud laughter! ! !

When playing Bad Baron in Liverpool, my love-scene of imitations was so great a success that when the Dame (Geo. Bastow) entered for his song the audience were still clamouring for me to come back. So quite seriously I went back as "Carton" whilst Bastow stood still in his really funny make-up. I then played

to him as "Lucie Manette," and the mock seriousness of my acting and his grotesque expression of surprise, I think, brought the biggest round of applause during the evening. It was therefore kept in for the run of the pantomime. Presence of mind and the power to seize on an opportunity are great factors in the success of a pantomime.

Pantomime stories are so varied that one could go on telling them almost for ever. Sometimes a pantomime is such an enormous success that in provincial towns it almost becomes part of the everyday life and talk of the townspeople—and also it can be as great a failure. In a certain very big town one year, everything went wrong. The company did not work together—nothing went right. One day in the street a little boy was naughty and crying. His mother scolded him, and told him to be a good boy, or she would take him to see the *pantomime*. The boy immediately was good——! ! !

THE END